

# NURSERY SCHOOLS IN ITALY



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## *The Problem of Infant Education*

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*by*

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

THIS book falls into two distinct parts, which were published together by the author under the title: *The Problem of Infant Education*. Each is a description of an Italian infant school; and, although the second is actually concerned with children from the age of three up to ten or eleven, both are essays on nursery education in a very real sense. I have visited many Italian schools of this kind, and always two things have struck me: the easy simplicity (and economy) of the organization and the rich variety of the children's activity, as wide in scope as it is "real" in quality. I like the unaffected good sense and lively, human awareness of teachers and children in all they say and do. And because the schools—I mean those sponsored by Professor Lombardo-Radice—seem to me to approach more nearly than any others I have met with on the Continent to the English *nursery school* tradition, I have stretched the accepted definition a little and called these two by that name.

The interest of the first part to English readers will be mainly historical. I do not suppose that it has any new doctrine to offer or that there are not, indeed, some educational details which will appear false or at least old-fashioned. What matters is the date—that this was an experiment launched long before either Madame Montessori in Italy or Miss Margaret

McMillan in England began her work. The point of the whole story is, avowedly, to prove that the real pioneer of Italian infant education was not Madame Montessori but Signorina Rosa Agazzi.

Professor Lombardo-Radice's views on the Montessori method itself, as well as some interesting data concerning its origins and history, are here set out with considerable emphasis. His theory of infant education and of child psychology generally has left its mark on the Italian School Reform, for which he was largely responsible; it is an odd sequel to his work that the Montessori method, so openly attacked by him, has since been officially adopted for all infant schools in Italy.

The Gentile Reform of 1924 is the background for the second half of the book. Professor Lombardo-Radice was then in charge of the entire reorganization of the elementary school system, and, as he explains, the experimental school opened by the Nigrisoli sisters at Portomaggiore in 1919 became for him an epitome of his philosophy and an advance proof of its practicability. The philosophy itself needs no apology. It is, broadly, that of the "Activity School" or "New Education," of which Professor Lombardo-Radice is a well-known representative.

In my translation I have kept as close as possible to the original. Sometimes I have changed names or references whose point in English would be lost, and

## *Translator's Preface*

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I have often kept words (such as natural history terms), which may sound odd in their setting, for the sake of technical accuracy or "local colour." The procedure has been quite unsystematic.

I have to thank the author, as well as Mrs. G. L. Hallam and Dr. Vincenzo Pacifici of Tivoli for their help and advice in the work, and also Signorina Rina Nigrisoli for the recent photographs of the children which she has sent from Portomaggiore for inclusion in the English edition.

May I say in conclusion, echoing the author's own words, how much I hope these unpretentious accounts, which owe their existence first and last to the inspiration of the teachers and children they speak of, may rekindle the pioneer enthusiasm of some English teachers and move them to go and see for themselves what an Italian "nursery" school can be like?

M. C. G.

LONDON, 1934





## AUTHOR'S PREFACE

WHEN, nearly three years ago, the young publishing firm with the promising name of "La Nuova Italia" asked me to write something about the School Reform, I felt I must refuse them, in spite of the honour they did me. I had already published too much on that theme and I thought I should only set a bad example if I indulged in useless repetition.

The time has come for the School Reform to make itself known to the Italian educational world by example rather than by precept; anyone with a knowledge of the facts ought to be able to see for himself what things he is asked to accept.

And so, instead of a book of my own, I offer you here two stories about two pioneer schools.

I have already published a few copies of these for the periodical, *L'Educazione Nazionale*, but they were rapidly exhausted. Now, through the generous initiative of this Venetian firm, I hope they will reach a wider circle of readers. May they inspire some part of that deep interest in small children which is the secret of the schools I speak of. May they come to the ears of a great many teachers and a great many mothers. May they bring to me, personally, a reward strong enough to rekindle in my heart the first, fine enthusiasm of our Reform.

GIUSEPPE LOMBARDO-RADICE

ROME

November 15, 1928



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## INTRODUCTION

by SUSAN ISAACS, M.A., D.Sc.

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THIS small book will give pleasure to everyone in England concerned with the education of little children. The first part, describing the pioneer work of Signorina Agazzi, is of no little historical interest. But its value is not merely historical. It will delight and strengthen those who are shy of all doctrinaire methods and feel with me that the natural and spontaneous relation of the intelligent mother and her child engaged together in the ordinary affairs of life is the best starting-point for early education. Signorina Agazzi sees the "school" for little children as a larger home, in which the ordinary business of living, the care of the body, of the home itself, the natural questions and spontaneous talk of the child about these ordinary events, and his natural impulses of play with the ordinary odds and ends of the household and garden, are the best means of gaining skill and understanding and joy in life. Nursery and infant school workers in England will find support here in the knowledge that others, too, have felt that the ordinary everyday tasks of the home make "a sound, understandable routine" for the child's daily living, bringing at one and the

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same time a natural discipline and a continuous means of development. They will welcome, too, Signorina Agazzi's view that the educator of the young child should not be unnaturally passive, but a real person, sensible and simple, ready to talk to and with the child when the child calls for it.

There is, however, a special reason for welcoming just now the emphasis of this book upon the natural relation of mother and child as the normal means of education. This is the basis of nursery school method in England, too; but it has largely been lost sight of in recent years in the training of infants under two. The tendency has increased to maintain a completely rigid routine, and to exert consistent pressure towards abnormal standards of self-control in the infant, together with an inhibition of the mother's normal impulses of sympathy and of the child's own childish satisfactions. These stern and rigid methods often have a disastrous effect upon the following years. It is improbable that the scientific principles of mental hygiene in infancy will turn out to be quite opposed to the normal impulses of the intelligent and loving mother. Doctrinaire teaching which increases the likelihood of neuroses by forbidding the mother to tend a screaming child, and lays down such standards of early sphincter control as increase the anxiety of

both mother and infant, is neither humane nor scientific.

The second part of the book, describing the school at Portomaggiore, carries further the same conception of the living relation of teacher and child. "The teacher is a person of flesh and blood." "It is an odd notion to banish the teacher out of respect for the liberties of the taught." A teacher need not become afraid of herself, of her own interests and convictions in learning to respect the personality and the interests of the children. She can leave them free to develop their pursuits and their understanding, without having to maintain a dead and colourless neutrality. At Portomaggiore the school (for somewhat older children) is not so much a home as a garden. But it is the children's garden, a place where the children's concern with birds and insects and the pageantry of the seasons forms their main source of experience and provides the main impetus to expression. Its special quality is the way in which the pursuit of understanding and the arts of expression rise out of the everyday experience of living things and the everyday feelings which these things stir in children and teacher alike. The teacher works with the children, sharing their work and their play.

Miss Glasgow has done service to us in England

in translating with such simplicity and beauty these records of actual achievement upon the lines many of us struggle to encourage. The book will be specially useful to young teachers and students in training who are set in circumstances—as alas so many are—where they cannot see such happy things in actuality.

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THE NURSERY SCHOOL AT  
MOMPIANO

DAILY LIFE AND TEACHING METHODS AT THE  
MOMPIANO NURSERY SCHOOL (1898-1926)

To all teachers who follow the Italian tradition,  
freely and without dogma extending their  
knowledge in the light of every new experience.

ROME

*June 1927*

## CHAPTER I

### A MEMORY

IN 1910, a good five years before the war, I was asked to give a course of lectures to the Teachers' Association of the Venezia Giulia. Its members were at that time engaged in defending their national culture against foreign domination—the finest of all struggles, to my mind—and it was an act of faith indeed, on their part, thus to call in the help of a mere stay-at-home.

However that may be, I began at once, enthusiastically, to work out my ideas on education. I hoped that my lectures might serve, at least for a few years, to help to till the virgin soil of a school which should be part of our national tradition. I meant them particularly for the Trieste teachers who, during years of oppression and in the face of every kind of hardship and hostility, had actually started a real, live elementary school system. It was from them that I drew my greatest inspiration; and I am only too glad to be able once again to acknowledge the debt which I contracted to them—chiefly in confidential talks pursued into the night after the day's public sessions.

But there is one service for which, up till now, I have never had an opportunity of thanking them. It was through the Trieste school-teachers that I first came to hear of the "Agazzi method" (they called it the "Italian method"). The president of the Teachers'

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Association introduced me to it by taking me to see one of the most attractive infant schools of the town.

Because, while our learned pedagogues in Italy—or I, at least, to my shame—had never even heard of this characteristically Italian movement, the Commune of Trieste were anxiously watching it. Because they saw it to be something vitally Italian, they eagerly sent for four women teachers from the fountain-head at Mompiano, near Brescia, to come and foster the method in what was then outer Italy.

For years I have preserved the memory of my delightful visit to the Trieste school. I discovered some very pleasant things about the life of the small children who worked there together, and, as I had just read the *Method of Scientific Pedagogy*, I defined what I saw as "Montessori." To-day I realize my inaccuracy, and I know that it ought to have been the other way about: these same characteristics as seen in the Children's Houses should properly be called "Agazzi."

## CHAPTER II

### SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF THE AGAZZI METHOD

THIS is an account of the Nursery School at Mompiano, where the Agazzi method was first started.

As a matter of fact, there are already quite a number of books about the school, although they are not widely known. In 1903 Professor Pietro Pasquali published at Brescia a book called *The New Infant School, or Notes from the Nursery School at Mompiano*, with numerous illustrations.<sup>1</sup> It has a short preface by the well-known writer Emma Boghen-Conegliani, who was from the beginning a warm supporter of the Agazzi experiment.

The previous year Professor Giuditta Contesini had made a study entitled: *The Country Kindergarten at Mompiano from an educational point of view*.<sup>2</sup>

Pasquali's book contains several long quotations from another by Signorina Rosa Agazzi herself, *Spoken Language*,<sup>3</sup> since republished with detailed practical notes. And Pasquali made a further attempt

<sup>1</sup> *Il Nuovo Asilo: Sulle Tracce dell'Asilo di Mompiano*. Brescia, Angelo Canossi & C., 1903. A continuation of this book appeared in 1910 called: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*. Milan, G. Merendi (Bibliotechina Pratica per le Educatrici).

<sup>2</sup> *Il Giardino Infantile Rurale di Mompiano, giudicato sotto l'aspetto pedagogico*. Dated May 15, 1902.

<sup>3</sup> *Lingua Parlata. 350 Esercizii Pratici ad uso dei Giardini Infantili e dei Prime Classi Elementari*. Brescia, Queriniana Press, 1910.

to get the method known and accepted in 1910, with a brief outline of the *Syllabus and Time-Table for the "New Infant Schools," compiled with reference to the Model Garden School at Mompiano, Brescia, in collaboration with the Brescia school-teachers.*<sup>1</sup>

Again, shortly afterwards, Signorina Agazzi published an excellent handbook, illustrated with musical texts, describing her experiments in teaching singing to infants.<sup>2</sup> And, finally, in 1923, she decided to issue in book form her "Practical Notes," containing an account of the teaching material gradually worked out by her in the course of her work. She called it *The Place of the School Museum in the Education of Children.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Programmi e Istruzioni del "Nuovo Asilo," compilati sulle tracce del Giardino-Modello di Mompiano (Brescia) in collaborazione colle Istituttrici di Brescia.* Paravia, pp. 72.

<sup>2</sup> *L'abbicci del canto educativo ad uso dei giardini d'infanzia e delle scuole elementari.* Milan, G. Merendi (Bibliotechina Pratica per le Educatrici, *La Voce delle Maestre d'Asilo*); and *Bimbi, Cantate! Melodie per l'Infanzia a compimento dell' "Abbicci" del Canto Educativo.* Brescia, Fratelli Gherardi.

<sup>3</sup> *Come intendo il Museo Didattico nell'Educazione dell' Infanzia e della Fanciullezza.* Brescia, Queriniana Press, 1923, pp. 123.

This, and all the earlier publications on the Agazzi method, may be obtained from Angelo Delai, Palazzo Broletto, Brescia. Signorina Agazzi's complete educational works are now being republished by the firm of "La Scuola" at Brescia. The series will include a delightful new book dated 1927, called: *Il Lavoro delle Piccole Mani* ("Handwork for Little Hands").

One or two dates: In 1892 the Agazzi sisters began their work in the infant schools of Brescia. In 1898 Signorina

*Sources for the Study of the Agazzi Method* 27

In the description which follows I shall very often have occasion to refer to these sources.

Rosa Agazzi was invited to attend the Congress of Turin by Gerolamo Nisio. In 1909 Pasquali gave an exhibition to illustrate the Mompiano method at Trieste. In February 1906 the Inspector Maestrelli made a report to the Ministry on the Agazzi method.

## CHAPTER III

### THE "INITIATIVE" PLAN

PASQUALI had always been a champion of the Agazzi plan, and he did his best to get official support for it. He realized that its merit lay in reducing to an absolute minimum any period when the children sit in rows listening to the teacher, and in leaving as much time as possible free for individual play. (Even to-day our infant schools fall far short of this ideal.)

To him, as to the Agazzi sisters, the grievous mistake in infant education had been "the blind, conventional routine" of the teaching, all done "to order." It produced perfect miracles in the way of marionettes, excellent at mimicry and at verbal memorization, trained like circus horses to go through their paces at a given word. But Pasquali wanted a school to be like a family, where the little ones are allowed to *live* in peace: "A small child should be free to drink when he is thirsty and wash when he needs to, to go into the garden and inspect his flower-beds (and other people's), look for caterpillars, weed and gather flowers and leaves, in short, to work and play as he wants without interference."<sup>1</sup>

I do not mean that children should not be actively occupied for as long as they like. Of course they should, provided they do not all do the same things, prescribed

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 36.



and superintended at every turn. It is absurd to expect them to answer questions in chorus or perform identical actions, keeping time. They should be left to follow their own devices as far as their life together permits, and only offered help when it is absolutely necessary. They should be encouraged but not too much corrected, and the rest left to their own desires and initiative.

Meanwhile, communal life at Mompiano does involve certain duties which the children love. To begin with, they all have to change into school overalls: they know how to do it themselves and the older ones help the babies. They all have to wash from head to foot, literally: the children know what to do and can do it alone. The stronger ones fetch water, fill the tubs and empty the dirty water, while the others help the youngest to change their socks and wash their feet. According to Pasquali, "the teacher superintends in the background" or "the teacher just looks on."<sup>1</sup> All by themselves they set out their little tubs for washing heads and faces, arms and hands. Some give out soap, others fill the basins, take away the dirty water and make a chain to carry fresh water from the pump to the bath which serves as reservoir. Everything is the children's own work, and it is easy to see who are the quickest, the most intelligent, the most willing, and who come running of their own accord to choose their jobs. "At first the mistress herself superintends the daily routine, but afterwards a servant girl takes

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 36.

charge, and all she does is to see that the different duties are properly carried out."<sup>1</sup>

After washing, they must brush and tidy their hair: all the bigger children do their own and the eldest help the little ones. "To be able to care for one's own small person unaided is the first glorious step towards independence."<sup>2</sup> "To be able to look after oneself and others, too, is already something more than independence."<sup>3</sup>

Dinner is like a meal in the fairy-tale world of the Seven Dwarfs. The masters of the house are little men and women, who serve and pour out and clear away for those who are smaller still, tie their bibs and break their bread for them. Afterwards, they hang out the table cloths and napkins to air and clear away the crumbs. It is all done *without help*: "The teacher merely looks on; and after the first few months she is not needed."<sup>4</sup>

After dinner a stream of children comes running round the servant in charge to give her their mugs for a final rinsing. (The mugs, each marked with a different symbol, like all their personal belongings, have, as a matter of fact, already been generously washed in the tubs provided for the purpose.) In this blessed country where water is plentiful it is considered an act of courtesy, merely, for washers-up to avoid splashing on the floor. Beside the servant are stationed

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Asilo*, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

two small "guardians of the plate rack," who take the mugs from her and put them upside down to drain.

Then there are games. "The teachers play a purely negative part. They confine themselves to keeping order and checking any naughtiness or roughness. Provided they are 'good,' the children are free to play as they like."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps one day there is firewood to be got in. The children all line up, making a chain from the yard to the top story. The logs pass from hand to hand, and you would hardly believe how quickly the pile at the bottom turns into a pile at the top! After that, fetching the daily supply of logs from the attic is an honour so much coveted that it has to be allotted in strict rotation.

They also take turns to do the housework, dusting, scrubbing and tidying. "The teacher stands by and applauds."<sup>2</sup>

If it rains and "they can't play in the garden, the children turn the 'work' room into a play room themselves. Very dexterously they pass the little tables and chairs across to one another and stack them against the walls. I suppose there are not many other teachers who would dare to let them do such a thing. They would most of them be afraid in case the children hurt themselves or 'got out of hand'. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

"This eager, daily activity not only teaches the

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Asilo*, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Contesini: *Il Giardino Infantile Rurale di Mompiano* . . . , p. 10.

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children to be useful but, more important still, makes them feel the joy of living.

"A certain discipline can be achieved through physical exercises in their proper time and place; but really there is no better all-round training in the world than everyday work. It forms a lifetime's habits of regular industry, and children take to it joyfully because they find in it just the movement their growing bodies need. It has the merit of being infinitely varied, according to the different things to be done, and indeed it provides a sound *understandable* routine for the child's whole life.

"Occupied in this way, he uses every part of him, and his nervous system is always sensibly, adequately nourished. His perceptions develop naturally, and his clear, childish reasoning is a reproach to all prejudiced, conventional adults.

"The Mompiano Nursery School has been built up on just such simple, logical lines as these."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Contesini: *Il Giardino Infantile Rurale di Mompiano* . . . , pp. 10-11.

## CHAPTER IV

### SMALL CHILDREN WHO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

IN a community like this, where life is full of sensible activity and movement and where everyone takes his share of the work, each member is bound to feel very responsible.<sup>1</sup>

A "Children's House" and the "duties of children in running their home": such was the scheme proposed by Pasquali and Agazzi.

Until a short time ago, I thought that the name "house" instead of "school" or "kindergarten" was first invented by Olga Lodi and then borrowed by Madame Montessori for her schools, as the latter describes in the first edition of her book. But recently I discovered that the word is much older and goes back to 1902 at least. Professor Giuditta Contesini called the infant school at Mompiano a children's "house" in her little book, *The Country Kindergarten at Mompiano*,<sup>2</sup> and it is worth noting that this book was approved by a special Commission appointed by the Commune of Brescia which included, besides Professor Contesini herself and other important Brescia people, Emma Boghen-Conegliani, Fanny Wölfler, Professor of Education, and the famous musician Professor Guglielmo Forbeck.

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> See p. 26.

I can only think it was red tape which prevented the adoption of the name "children's house" from that moment. In official circles certain institutions figuring in the budget were known categorically as "infant schools," and although, of course, names are irrelevant compared with results, still it is extremely significant that this name was put forward so early in connection with the school reform carried out by the Agazzi sisters. The whole subject is admirably treated by Pasquali in his illustrated book of 1903, *Il Nuovo Asilo*.

Elsewhere Pasquali writes: "Accustom the children to recognize their different possessions, and to know the little drawings which mark them. Teach them to make proper use of everything, and to distinguish between white clothes, table linen, and so on. You will soon see how quickly they begin of their own accord to put things neatly away in their right places, and how ready they are to notice and correct any untidiness."<sup>1</sup>

Genuine responsibility, not the pretence of it as practised in the elementary school, is defined by the biographer of the Mompiano Nursery School in this way: "Put into the children's hands all the everyday things which turn up in the course of school life, and teach them to use them at the right time and in the right place, to keep them clean and put them back

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 41.

when finished with—tools, kitchen utensils, and then, later, *precious and fragile* things.”<sup>1</sup>

And again: “Teach them to be always very prompt in returning *borrowed* things.”

This idea of responsibility is not confined to neatness and exactitude in the children’s own affairs. It includes responsible *work*. There is practical work of some kind for children of every age, and, wherever possible, it is advisable to let them use ordinary, full-sized implements. “Most everyday jobs bring the whole of a child’s body into play; they demand the use of all kinds of different implements, spades, shovels, rakes, hoes, wheelbarrows, boxes, sacks, trays, pails, basins, tubs, baskets. . . . Out of doors, the children can dig and smooth, water the plants and carry water as well as sand, gravel, and bricks about the garden. Or else they can move chairs and benches and clothes-racks and tidy away tools and wood. There is usually something to be done in the garden or the potting-shed; but if not, they always love to fill and empty in a general way, distribute and collect, pile up, pour away, wash, clean, hang out. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

But to Signorina Agazzi the best of all is *gardening*, because it is done out of doors. In 1902 Pasquali relates that “except for the vines and fruit trees, the whole garden is entrusted to the children.”<sup>3</sup> And after

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell’Asilo*, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Asilo*, p. 68 and plate 55.

twenty-one years of constructive work at Mompiano, Signorina Agazzi declared again: "School gardening generally resolves itself into a series of disconnected jobs performed here and there in odd places; actually, it ought to be the basis and very condition of an ordered school life."<sup>1</sup>

All this dates from 1902. I emphasize the year, because several well-known supporters of the National Montessori Association have, in ignorance of the dates, mistaken my researches for "a wish to discredit by any means a genuinely Italian educational method which is endeavouring to make progress along its own lines."<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it is I who plead the priority and the Italian character of a conception which I consider more perfect, and which was also founded by an Italian woman. What I desire is to see the Montessori method prized in so far as it resembles the Agazzi, because although the latter has been less fortunate in its history, it is more vital and more truly our own. Everything not Italian in Madame Montessori's conception, all the abstract, mechanical contrivances which go by her name, I should like to have judged on their merits; because actually they were invented by Itard, Séguin, Bourneville and the Frères de la Charité, and only adapted later by Madame Montessori to the use of normal children. She did her

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Come intendo il Museo Didattico* . . . , p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> See the Report of the "Brennero" Committee, January 30, 1927 (*Comunicato del Comitato sul "Brennero"*).



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work well, and her contribution to infant education is a valuable and lasting one; but it only touches one aspect of the subject.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> It is odd and interesting that a number of well-meaning people have sounded the alarm, thinking that I am out to swallow up for good the Children's Houses and the whole Montessori method. That is not my idea at all. The Montessori Children's Houses are known all the world over and are very fashionable in many countries: Anglo-Saxon Theosophists, Buddhists, Protestants and Jesuits are favourably inclined to the Montessori apparatus; and even where the movement has been freely developed and adapted in ways not approved of by the orthodox, its schools are still called "Montessori."

It is not only a question of the special, sense-training apparatus; that is one side of the method, and there are actually two. The other side, which is concerned with everyday life for little children and an environment suited to it, has deservedly achieved a world-wide reform of infant education. Montessori "houses" and schools are springing up everywhere, and "Montessori" is the name given to new institutions of all kinds which try to provide human conditions for their children. Far be it from me, indeed, to discredit any of this work; how could I, anyhow, even if I wanted to? I have tried to take the point of view of the historian who gives to every man his due.

If I have made known the origins of the best in the Montessori method (others have already established the origins of the mechanistic apparatus), I should like to claim the credit of having justified in the eyes of modern educational thinkers the Italian leadership of the reform in infant education, and of having reinstated the pioneers of the "Italian method"—the way of the living school. I have been a critic, pure and simple, whose job was to analyse dispassionately, never to accept without question what happened to be fashionable.

When at a congress at Turin in 1898, in the presence of

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Madame Montessori herself, Signorina Agazzi expounded her ideas, there were still twelve years to run before the coming of the Montessori method; and when in 1902 Pasquali published his first book on the Agazzi method, Madame Montessori's own book was not yet born or thought of.

It is all quite simple and straightforward: what we know as "exercises of practical life," or education for independence, are the happy realization of Signorina Agazzi's first conception, and they came into being before Madame Montessori's time.

## CHAPTER V

### BABIES AS TEACHERS

THERE are two principles in modern infant education as we know it—"exercises of practical life," and sense training through special material. I have tried to make it clear that the first was put into practice consciously and with complete success by the Agazzi sisters at the Mompiano Nursery School several years before it began to be taught as part of the Montessori method, and I therefore consider myself justified in speaking of it as the Agazzi method.

About this time a famous English educationist, Lucy Latter, wrote a book in which she attached great importance to gardening and other simple activities for children. She was a person of imagination, who at the same time really understood the business of teaching, and Madame Montessori owes much to her work.<sup>1</sup>

Signorina Agazzi's theory is, on the whole, more comprehensive than Miss Latter's. For one thing, she emphasizes *hygiene* in the daily routine at the school—an important point, considering the home conditions of her working-class children. She always puts personal cleanliness first, and she means it to include a detailed care of the whole body. She says, for instance: "The

<sup>1</sup> On Madame Montessori's own admitting, up to 1921. After that date the name of Latter goes the same way as the others; it has been omitted in the later editions of *Scientific Pedagogy*.

habit of regular washing in school, as an individual and collective practice, gives the teacher endless opportunities. I want to stress this point, because it seems to me that the very number and variety of the objects involved (constituting, so to speak, museum pieces to illustrate the art of washing) show it to be a particularly valuable way of giving each child a sense of neatness and responsibility for his own and other people's possessions."<sup>1</sup>

Where the Agazzi plan fails is in not working out a proper scheme for nature study. Miss Latter treats the subject in detail in her admirable book, *School Gardening for Little Children*, translated into Italian in 1908 by Alice Franchetti.

As we have seen, personal hygiene in the Agazzi school carries with it a full equipment of useful objects. For instance: "Each child must have at his disposal plenty of water, his own piece of soap, towels for his feet, face and hands, and head, and his own brush and comb. . . ."<sup>2</sup> It must be excellent practice merely to know how to put away all these complicated belongings! Agazzi children are continually occupied with practical details of that kind, unconventional, unacademic, which make other children seem by comparison leisured.

A very important part of it all is the assistance given to the little ones by the older children. The school is

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Come intendo il Museo Didattico . . .*, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, p. 64.

arranged in three groups: the youngest of all, the three-year-olds; the middles, aged four; and the "seniors" of five and six. Until they can help themselves, the babies are cared for by the seniors; the middles, who are not yet competent to help others, are themselves by this time independent; the eldest are supposed to have reached a stage of such efficiency that they can devote themselves entirely to the little ones.

All this "student-teacher" activity (and delightful it is to watch) is very well described in the earliest accounts of the Mompiano Nursery School by Contesini and Pasquali. But I prefer to quote from the later and more complete description given by Pasquali: "Things are so arranged that every little boy and girl of five is entrusted with a three-year-old to look after, with advice, help and protection at certain stated times of the day. He is given every chance to use his maternal instinct (mercifully, at this age, the same for both sexes), and there is no lack of suitable occasions.

"When they arrive, he shows his charge how to say 'good morning,' and helps him to take off his things, change his shoes, wash his feet, face and hands, and put on his overall. When the teacher comes to wash the baby's head, it is the senior who does the drying. Then he cleans his clogs and brushes his hair. During the day he watches to see whether the little one needs his nose wiping and teaches him to use his handkerchief; and at the proper time he ties his bib and takes him in to meals. He shows him, by example, how to sit up straight, and afterwards he helps him to

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rinse his mouth. He takes down and hangs up again his towels and brushes, socks and other personal belongings, and meanwhile he takes every opportunity of teaching him to recognize his own distinguishing mark, stamped on all his things. An older child loves doing jobs for a little one, such as helping him to dig over the babies' flower-bed, tidying away papers and sticks and dead leaves. Then, of course, he takes him to the teacher to have his cuts and bruises attended to, and himself helps with the dressings. He holds his hand on walks and in going up and down stairs, and he will often bring him little presents of flowers and leaves and things he has made. He is also expected to give up his chair to him if by any chance there is not room for everyone.

"Such are the opportunities which arise in the ordinary course of the day. The resourceful teacher will find quantities of others."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Spirito dell'Asilo*, pp. 66-67.

## AGAZZI MATERIAL FOR WORK AND PLAY

WHEN little children are learning how to solve their first problems, they need plenty of material on which to practise. The kind of material provided at the Mompiano Nursery School was planned out as far back as 1902, and falls, roughly, into two groups: everyday things for work and play, and a special set for direct sense training and the first beginnings of language teaching.

The first group includes: (1) Things used by everyone, singly or collectively, in the daily routine—individual belongings all suitably marked so that they can be recognized by their owners; (2) the little marking symbols themselves, separately and in various forms, which can be named, talked about and painted; and (3) indoor and outdoor playthings.

The "special" material for developmental training can easily be collected or made by the teacher herself, with the children's help, and used in different ways according to her needs and her knowledge of each child's actual stage of growth. This is, of course, the more important group, and I shall devote a separate chapter to it. As a scheme for sense training, so-called, it anticipated many of the objections to the Montessori method and may rank with justice as a forerunner of the Decroly material.

But first we will consider in detail the ordinary toys and tools which the children play with every day.

## I. EVERYDAY THINGS FOR WASHING AND EATING WITH

First of all, there is the common stock of furniture: airing racks, clothes-baskets, chests and lockers. On wet and misty days, the children hang up their damp outdoor things to dry and fetch their school overalls themselves from the proper baskets; then, at the end of the day, they fold them tidily away again. This is called daily "tidy drill."<sup>1</sup>

Each child keeps a pair of woollen socks and a pair of "school" shoes in the nursery, and every morning a little band of helpers hands them round to their owners. Every morning the children change their socks, the big ones helping the babies. In summer they wash their feet at this stage every day, in winter only twice a week.

Each child has a little toilet set for himself, two hand- and face-towels, two for his feet and one for his head, and two pocket handkerchiefs, all marked with his own symbol. He is responsible for taking them out, using and putting them away, disposing of soiled things and arranging clean linen in the proper place. Naturally, no single servant girl could ever do all this for a hundred small children; but as it is, things just get done—even the youngest do their share, "helping" the big ones.

That does not exhaust the list of washing materials—remember, an Agazzi nursery school is never short of water. There is also all the common property—brooms, aprons and overalls for use during head-

<sup>1</sup> Pasquali: *Il Nuovo Asilo*, p. 25.



washing, basins and soap-graters,<sup>1</sup> tubs, of course, for hot and cold water, ladles, buckets for carrying water, and jugs and all manner of stools, chairs and benches.

Such abundant equipment, though actually it is as simple as that of any humble, self-respecting home, offers endless opportunity for training in sense- and motor-control. As we saw earlier on, the children themselves bring basins for clean water and pails for carrying away dirty water, and the strongest take them backwards and forwards. The big ones, as "pupil teachers," tuck up the little ones' clothes before they wash, and afterwards take them to sit on the bench where they can dry themselves. Then they help them to put on their socks and do up their shoes (we have no need of lacing-frames here!). It is the children who hand round the soap and children who do each other's hair.

After washing, the elder children put on their play overalls and help the little ones with theirs, buttoning and lacing up with fervour. There is further adventure and more work to be done in the dining-room and kitchen, and here, too, the various household implements are largely in the hands of the children. They are quite competent to deal with the saucepan for the beans, the mincing machine, basins for washing vegetables, weighing scales, plates, ladles and the rest. In addition, everyone has his own bowl, spoon, aluminium mug, and bib—all duly marked.

<sup>1</sup> The soap used by the children is grated down from large blocks.—M. C. G.

The children take it in turns to lay the tables, bringing bowls and spoons in their baskets and learning how to handle everything in the right way—I mean, hygienically. Other children take it in turns to inspect the work and put the finishing touches. After the first two months all goes perfectly smoothly and there is really no need for the teacher to be there at all.

Then the hot soup for dinner arrives, and while it is being served the older children tie the babies' bibs.—I ought to have said that everyone finds his own mug and washes it again after drinking.

## 2. MARKING SYMBOLS AND WHAT THEY REPRESENT

The happy, purposeful life these children lead must in itself induce an orderly habit of mind. The using and putting away of any object calls for discipline; and just as discipline is the result of a number of isolated acts of self-control, so there is discipline in the very fact of a single child adjusting himself to the common life with all it entails in the way of new duties and charges. Discipline means the sum of individual energies working together towards a healthy, peaceful life.

The system of marking with symbols is much more important for discipline than would appear at first sight. Through symbols, even the smallest children can discover for themselves, and *quietly*, anything they may need, and, as they come across other people's

belongings, they begin to learn the practical difference between "mine" and "thine." Young illiterates that they are, they can read their own distinguishing signs on all sides, on clogs and socks and overalls, on towels, bibs, coat-hooks, mugs. They read their own, and then, gradually, other people's; and the whole collection of designs becomes an attractive picture language, decorative in itself, quite apart from its practical value. It is an excellent aid to language teaching—hundreds of different images, making a game of "look and say."

Each nursery group has its own series of symbols. The first, the three-year-olds, use easy drawings of familiar things—toys, domestic animals, well-known fruit and flowers and so on; the second group, the "middles" of four, have tools, household furniture and utensils; and the big children of five, out of respect for their advanced years, are promoted to geometrical designs.

All the symbols are, so to speak, perpetuated; that is, they exist separately, in the form of models, which are given to the children and made the occasion for a little talk, if only over the giving out and naming. Each child receives something different, and the teacher says its name and asks him to repeat it. A lively discussion begins at once, as the children admire each present in turn. The older children explain everything from the height of their superior knowledge, talking and exchanging reminiscences with their friends, and there is a happy clattering of feet as they all compare

notes and examine each other's possessions at close quarters. When the interest dies down, the teacher collects the things again.

The same thing happens the next day, and after a time (of course it is never for more than a few minutes) the children themselves do the distributing and collecting, each one choosing out his own property and repeating its name when he hears it.

Then the children play at recognizing their own symbols when the teacher draws them on the black-board; they run to find the object to match the drawing; or they find their own symbols in a box among all the others. They can outline the shapes with pebbles in the courtyard—this is an excellent game for the older groups; or they practise sorting out their belongings, silently, from a heap containing all kinds of marked things. The eldest are sometimes lent their models to take away, and they keep them several days, comparing them with other, similar treasures and perhaps making pictures of them. Sometimes they are asked to help their "babies" to recognize their symbols and claim the things marked with them.

So the symbol becomes the subject of the child's ordinary conversation. He is never allowed to feel isolated at the nursery school.

The marking symbol, with thirty-seven years of service to its credit, has no need of any patent. Every teacher can make her own set to taste, and can vary it according to the place where she is to suit the varying ranges of infant experience. In other

words, it is not, like some infant school equipment, *standardised*.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> List of the original Mompiano symbols:

" 'One child, one object'—make sure that there are enough to go round.

"Symbols according to groups—each section of the school has its own type of symbol, forming a separate group:—

"*Section I*: A variety of things, including—a pear, a flower, a wheel, a whip, a dice, a jersey, a house, a hand, a butterfly, a shoe, a chain, a wheelbarrow, a fish, a bell, a bugle, a fan, an apple, a branch, a vase, a ball, a flag, a cart, a hat, a leaf, a sunshade, scales, a pumpkin, an egg, a cherry, a bib, a basket, a bed, a spider's web, a snake, a church, a star, a shirt. (Living creatures like dogs, cats, oxen, horses, birds and cocks have been taken off the list because they are difficult to reproduce with a needle on the various materials.)

"*Section II*: Household utensils and other objects of everyday use, such as: a pail, a basin, a funnel, a saucepan, a bottle, a chair, a shovel, a porridge bowl, a fork, a spoon, a knife, scissors, a coffee-pot, a tub, a table, a candlestick, a gate, a broom, fire-tongs, a palette, a key, a threaded needle, a door, a chopper, a sideboard, a bread trencher, a hammer, a chest of drawers, a ladder, a padlock, a watering-can, a scythe, a hoe, a coffee-mill, a clock, a pair of spectacles, pincers, a frying-pan, a bicycle.

"*Section III*: One spot, two spots, three spots, four spots, a vertical line, a horizontal line, a sloping line, a curved line, a straight line with dots at the ends, a straight line with curved ends, a broken line, an angle, a square, another kind of rectangle, a triangle, a circle, two squares interlaced, two circles interlaced, a big square and a little, a big circle and a little, a little square inside a big one, a circle inside a square, a little triangle inside a big one, an angle and a triangle, a square and a triangle, a circle and a rectangle, a square with cross-lines, a square with diagonals, a square with cross and diagonal lines, a square reticulated, a semi-circle, a spiral."

The system of individual marking symbols has been adopted in most Italian infant and nursery schools, and in a certain number of foreign ones, and it has even been introduced into the first class of some elementary schools. Yet the humble infant teacher who invented it has remained unknown for years, and late indeed has come the recognition she fully deserves not only for this particular invention but for the entire conception of infant education which is hers.

### 3. INDOOR AND OUTDOOR PLAYTHINGS

The Agazzi method is very careful to avoid any too "scientific" analysis of play and play material for its students. Being whole-heartedly Italian, it is ready to make use of all the popular games and toys which belong to local tradition or which the children themselves evolve. Wheelbarrows, skittles, hoops, balls, the ordinary *large* playthings are welcomed and encouraged. One of the first principles of the Agazzi method is that children should never be made to sit still when they want to move about.

While the children are doing their daily jobs, their movements are to some extent restricted, and the result, for them, is undoubtedly an effort. Discipline is none the less real for being enjoyed; but in free play, with centuries of popular custom behind them and their toys, they can let themselves go, giving rein to their fantasies and revelling in every new triumph of skill.

Yet games, too, involve self-control and obedience to rules—the rules of the game. A game is only worthwhile when it achieves its end. He plays best who, quick and neat of limb, sound of judgment and alert of eye, succeeds in what he aims at; the joy is not in the rivalry but in the goal, the realization of something imagined, the actual, dramatic attainment of the player's dream. The emotional and aesthetic possibilities of popular children's games are many and various; they teem with curious, symbolic tunes and dances and old, traditional rhymes handed down from generation to countless generations of babies.

Play is certainly the most natural and effective means of sense training. In play, all the senses are used at once; the child himself learns and grows, not only a part of him. All the school needs to do is to provide suitable material and plenty of opportunity.

Elsewhere, Signorina Agazzi has herself allowed for some isolated exercises in sense values for helping children to use their judgment. Actually, she anticipates Madame Montessori in this field. And we shall see that her results are more valuable, because of the widely varied *speech training* which arises naturally out of her apparatus.

## AGAZZI TEACHING MATERIAL

### I. ODDMENTS THAT NEED NO PATENT

THE "special" Agazzi material for sense training and early language teaching is very varied. Admirably suited to both purposes, it has the great advantage of costing nothing or next to nothing.

It consists of odds and ends, all the worthless scraps which are really infinitely precious for showing a child how to collect and arrange. (In this connection, may I say that the Montessori apparatus seems to me needlessly elaborate? It is well to remember that it was originally intended for backward and defective children.)

The Agazzi material is simply an immense collection of oddments: little boxes and buttons and seeds, fruit stones, bits of string and ribbon and tubing, dolls, bottles and corks, samples of wallpaper and stuffs and so on, balls and paper bags and purses, post cards, pieces of wood and leather, wax, clay, iron or anything else. Things that are no good to other people are a godsend to Signorina Agazzi.

Her conception of a school museum was first suggested to her by the astonishing collections of "specimens" to be found in the pockets of most slum children. We all know these treasures, ranging from sea-shells, pebbles and bits of wood to walnut-shells and berries. "My museum," says Signorina Agazzi, "costs nothing. I should call it the Poor Man's



Museum, if it were not that every child enjoys it far more than the toy shops of the rich."<sup>1</sup>

Besides the scraps that teachers and children gather together, there is always the home-made kind, manufactured by themselves—toys and models in paper and cardboard. There is practically nothing that need be bought, or, if so, it can be had from the local shops for a trifle.

All this corresponds to what the psychologists call "test material." Only in the Agazzi scheme it is used not merely as apparatus for observing a child's reactions, but as a direct means of forwarding his development through experience. In any case, the Agazzi material does not pretend to be scientific.

First, we find the idea of grouping things "which are the same in every respect except one,"<sup>2</sup> in order to teach the children how to single out particular qualities. The material is never so rigidly chosen that the variable quality is the same in every case. Rather, the groups have all manner of different things in

<sup>1</sup> Signorina Agazzi has made a systematic guide to her "museum," based on her experience as an infant teacher from 1898 to the date of its publication in the form of an admirable little book: *The Place of the School Museum in the Education of Children*. Practical hints for use in infant schools and in the lower classes of the primary school. Brescia, "Queriniana," 1923 (now reprinted by the firm of "La Scuola," Brescia).

<sup>2</sup> To quote a subsequent phrase of Madame Montessori.

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common and are given to the children in any order—a new problem every time, so as to encourage initiative.

Side by side with this comes the grading of sizes in objects made of the same stuff.

To be able to tell the difference between given objects is not in itself helpful. It *does* matter knowing what the difference is. Signorina Agazzi aims at developing her children's powers of discernment not by sharpening their separate senses, but by helping them to master the growing mass of their experience. Here *speech* is of the greatest use: briefly her apparatus teaches the children to keep their eyes open and to talk.

The children at Mompiano never work in silence. They chatter among themselves the whole time while they group and select their material. After all, store-cupboards so rich in possibilities provide endless excuse for discussion. Such is the beginning of conversation.

The "specimens" are arranged in boxes and envelopes, for the teacher as well as the children. In the *children's* boxes you will find, for example, *colour* materials, a different selection for each child, according to his stage of development.

Some are told to divide up the colours into groups. They have beans, pebbles, beads, shells or make-believe sweets.

Others "classify" pieces of coloured paper and arrange them in a box, two of each colour.

Others again make patterns of coloured paper to match a given model.

Then there is the game of "applied colour." For this the children are given boxes containing various stuffs and asked to choose the appropriate thread for sewing each piece.

There are boxes for *grading* colour, with little bits of paper painted in varying shades. You mix them up and then rearrange them.

All children love the game of "Happy Families." They are given boxes or bags, enough to go round, full of little scraps of everything under the sun, iron, wood, rubber, brass, stone, tin, wax, chalk, bone, celluloid, sealing-wax, pewter; or bits of stuff—wool, silk, cotton, braided straw, raffia, leather. The game is to sort them all out, comparing the contents of your own bag with other people's: "Who's got most wax? May I have some of your bone? Who wants some iron—or wood—or whatever it may be?" Needless to say, at odd times like these the children get endless practice in talking. The "families" may be varied at will; but Signorina Agazzi is careful to specify the limits to the variety which should be used at a time, "so that the eye does not become distracted by too great a confusion of colour and substance." There should be a certain unity in the range chosen; and for this game the *shape* is the thing to vary. She says:

"Anyone can get half a kilo of 'pasta.'<sup>1</sup> A mixture of all the pretty little shapes on show in the baker's window will do excellently, provided you take out the

<sup>1</sup> "Pasta" means the whole range of macaroni products; in this case, the little shapes used in soups, etc.—M. C. G.

very small ones, and the alphabet letters.—Anyone can produce some old buttons they don't want.—And surely no holiday-maker at the seaside would be too proud to collect a bag of little shells for us. These last have a particular value in that they will keep and are easily washable. Contributions gratefully received." And so at the nursery school they play the time-honoured games of every normal child, collecting, sorting, arranging, as fantasy suggests.

To add point to the children's doings, the *teacher* makes a selection herself, to be a kind of model or summing-up; I do not mean material for a lesson, but only a few things for her to show and explain at odd moments, when the time is ripe. She might have, for instance, a geometrical series, including typical shapes illustrated by common objects: for a sphere, an indiarubber ball, a ball of wool, a cherry, a bead, a round pumpkin, an orange; for a cylinder, a bottle, a round needle holder, a candle, a full cotton reel and a cork; for a circle, a gramophone record, different kinds of rings, coins, buttons, plates, lids; and so on. The world is full of riches; why make it seem poor by shutting the child up among the intricacies of a standardized apparatus?

Signorina Agazzi gives full rein to the ingenuity of the teacher whose job it is to foster the child's creative instincts. She likes to see them all at work together, teacher and children, as Decroly imagined them later. Perhaps, one day, they will collect pictures of things which are "the same only different." An

inexhaustible source of material is to be found in manufacturers' catalogues and shop advertisements, from which pictures can be cut out and pasted on to cardboard. I can imagine collections of differently shaped baskets, or vases, or chairs, lampshades, bottles or candlesticks.

Another important source of delight to the collector is picture post cards—series of towers [“campanili”—M. C. G.] or fountains, or churches. . . . The children set out, open-eyed, to discover their world, talking hard all the time.

Sometimes they play at sorting and classifying figured materials according to their patterns. A whole series of exercises in right discrimination may be based on printed cretonnes, each child being given a sample from each group and asked to find others to match. For instance: *Group 1*: (a) rectangular patterns; (b) more precisely, squared patterns; (c) horizontal stripes, or vertical, or sloping; (d) circles and spots. . . . *Group 2*: Stuffs of the same colour but different design. *Group 3*: Stuffs of the same design but different colour.

Of course, cretonnes cannot be improvised. The teacher has to wait patiently, collecting odd samples and ends as she finds them.

After they have learnt to recognize colours and shapes, the children go on to experiment with *size*: big, little, smaller and greater. Any teacher can invent and fabricate the necessary series for herself.<sup>1</sup> Sig-

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Come Intendo il Museo Didattico . . .*”

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norina Agazzi, realizing from long experience how slow children are to have any sure notion of comparative degrees, made up a number of exercises calculated to improve what was afterwards called "auto-control." The teacher, with time and care (and the natural ingenuity essential to every infant mistress), finds or makes series of objects all exactly alike except in size, at least eight of each, regularly graded. For instance; eight little bottles; eight little paper boxes of the same shape; illustrations from statistical books, perhaps, showing increase and decrease in picture form; and so on indefinitely. The Agazzi teacher is helpless unless she is an inventor.

The children learn to appreciate the different sizes by arranging the things in order. Sometimes the teacher gives them out, sometimes they choose for themselves.

Signorina Agazzi puts the question whether it is necessary to insist on special exercises as such. She concludes in the end that there is, at any rate, no need to follow a rigid programme, submitting each separate sense to a certain range of stimuli. (I always think the Montessori time-table places undue emphasis on the senses of taste and smell!) Exercises should be designed to help the child to understand his surroundings. They can have no other purpose, and, if they really meet his interests, they will appeal to him so much that he will eagerly pursue them on his own account, with whatever he happens to have handy.

The truth is that sense training ought to vary as

much as possible, never to crystallize. Concentration on some particular, variable aspect is only useful when there is plenty of material to illustrate it. Some kind of unity there must be, of course; otherwise the child would never grasp what was expected of him. But there is no reason why anything should ever be dull or monotonous.

\* \* \* \* \*

It will be seen that all these activities, based on "unpatented material," are in the nature of performance tests of intelligence. But they are not standardized, and they have the great advantage over most others, whether used primarily for testing or for teaching purposes, of giving a natural stimulus to language. Through the Agazzi play material the children are given the best possible preparation for school; and this is the secret of the success of the method in the mixed, bi-lingual districts of Venetia, Giulia and the Trentino. Outside visitors to the Alto Adige have been amazed at the richness of language displayed by the German children under six; already, at this age, they teach Italian to their elders at home! I have no hesitation in saying that the Agazzi method has been and still is the most powerful means of language penetration that I know.

In this respect the Agazzi test material (to give it the accepted name) is very like the Decroly. And it has the same quality of *play*, even when it happens to take the form of systematically devised exercises.

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I have tried to give some slight idea of what it consists of, with a very few examples. Now, to sum up, the following indication by Signorina Agazzi herself may be useful:

### *Guide to the Use of Play Material*

- (a) The teacher should give each child a toy or an implement of some kind to play with for a short time. After a few days, set out the same things, with one or two fresh ones, and get the children to find the things they each had before.
- (b) Later, produce things with more in common, like boxes, and give the children one each. Then, after a time, mix them up and ask each child to find his own.
- (c) Get a number of different little boxes, with two of each kind; ask a child to examine one and then find the twin among the rest. The teacher can gradually reduce the time spent in looking at the first as the children become accustomed to taking things in quickly.
- (d) Do the same with pictures of flowers, fruit, people, landscapes, etc.

Set out the objects on a low table where all the children can see them and take an active part in the game.

It is quite easy to procure a collection of suitable picture post cards.

Using the same methods, but more carefully, proceed to the recognition of patterns and colours. For this, a selection of printed fabrics may be used.

\*                      \*                      \*                      \*

Some of the Agazzi games require considerable power of imagination on the part of the children. Sometimes they are asked to recognize the mutation



of solids, as, for example, in substances reduced to powder; they grind or crush some solid, and then give the right names to the bits and to the original substance. Suitable materials are: grain, seeds, potatoes, chestnuts, Indian corn, beans of different sorts, fruit-kernels, pepper, rice; and more varied things like wood, sulphur, soap, coal, marble; or again another range: cinnamon, cheese, chocolate and sugar. Of course, some of the grinding-up processes have to be left to the teacher, while others can only be seen in ready-made substances; but all the same there are a great many which can be performed by the children. Gradually the teacher is able to collect a very wide range of material, representing a long chain of experiments.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have only been able to give a very incomplete picture of the scope and variety of the material evolved by Signorina Agazzi. I have so far entirely neglected the speech training which goes along with it, and the ways in which the children, through handwork, prepare their own apparatus.

## 2. THE AGAZZI MATERIAL AND THE FIRST LANGUAGE LESSONS IN THE NURSERY SCHOOL

The importance of helping children with their speech difficulties is everywhere acknowledged and I ought not to have to stress it here. And yet there are certain

ultra-modern educationists who appear to have forgotten this simple need.

To learn a language during the early years of one, two and three, is an attainment which can only be appreciated by a mother. It cannot be done without real, sympathetic understanding between the child and his elders. There must be a conscious application of the new words he learns to his growing perceptions; and, vice versa, he will only be able to understand the world he lives in with the help of the spoken word.

And yet how curious it is that "scientific method"—gross travesty of what Pascal once called "*l'esprit de géométrie*"—should pretend to clarify children's ideas by conversation, while at the same time reducing to virtual silence the grown-up people round them! I think "scientific method" often becomes a disease with purely theoretical educationists, and so it comes about that the nursery school and all pre-school institutions, including the modernist Children's Houses, by trying to avoid a deluge of words which may bewilder the child, end by depriving the teacher of her special, maternal function of helping and explaining.

If you look, for instance, at the part played by speech in Madame Montessori's *Method of Scientific Pedagogy*, you will notice at once her almost complete neglect of language training; an omission even more disappointing than her other big mistake of missing out *singing* from her scheme. Of course, if Madame Montessori had wished to apply her scientific ideas

to children's conversation, she would have had to employ the same criteria as in her analysis of movement in young children, designed to correct their early awkwardness. The result would have been the same isolated concentration on a particular quality which is her aim in rhythmic and sense training. Actually, it should be clearly recognized that the necessity of subordinating language in general, including children's personal talk, to analytic exercises is an integral part of the Montessori system. But we are not told *why* analysis must form part of the training in discrimination of tastes and smells, and not of speech, which is, surely, a living synthesis of all sense perceptions. In connection with her manipulative exercises—by which she means lacing and buttoning—Madame Montessori says:

"Clumsiness consists in confusing the successive moments in an action. It is like the hasty pronunciation of long words, when the different syllables run together and the result is a vague, meaningless sound." (Exactly!) "When someone speaks badly, it means that he is not discriminating between the sounds making up the words. Missing out and confusing different sounds has nothing to do with the pace; indeed, a person who stumbles over his words is often slow of speech."<sup>1</sup>

Yet what does the Montessori method do to provide for speech an analytic training equal to the famous lacing-frames for hand and eye control?—Nothing,

<sup>1</sup> Montessori: *Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica*, 3rd edition, Rome, 1926, p. 110.

or next to nothing. The teacher is limited to "teaching precise nomenclature,"<sup>1</sup> and that is all there is for "the correction of speech defects, which is a simple business at this early age."

But the business is only simple if the child has constant opportunities of talking, and if the teacher talks to him freely, as a mother does. Otherwise, it will be anything but simple.

And then . . . "nomenclature." Surely language, even at the beginning, is much more than just naming things. But the latest Montessori technique expects the teacher to limit herself, as far as possible, to isolated words (I imagine this is out of respect for the sacred silence where the child must be left free for "self-expression.") "It is important not to say anything except the name."<sup>2</sup>

Higher up on the same page with this strange prohibition is a passage proving the absurdity of trying to use nouns by themselves. It is like a warning by the original Montessori against her later self. There she gives as an example: "It is cold; it is hot; it is frosty; it is lukewarm, or burning hot." Already she has said more than the mere name. For supposing a teacher has some hot and cold water brought for feet-washing: how is she to avoid going into details? "That is too hot; the water in this basin is hotter than in that one; cold water is not so good for washing; you had better put half and half"; and so on. How *can* she avoid

<sup>1</sup> Montessori: *Metodo della Pedagogia Scientifica*, 3rd edition, Rome, 1926, p. 187.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

embroidering the words—always supposing the nursery school *is* a nursery school and not one for stammerers, or idiots pure and simple?

At Mompiano they use common sense. New words and idioms are explained in the ordinary course of conversation. The children talk and learn at the same time, and grammar mistakes are corrected as they appear in talk between children and teacher.

There are really two sides to language lessons for infants. First, some kind of analysis of the child's vocabulary and pronunciation in word games, puns and riddles (the fruits of popular wisdom through the ages); and secondly, living language, that is, conversation about everyday work and play at school; saying "good morning" and "good-bye"; reciting little verses which the children can appreciate and telling stories. The success of the first language lessons depends on the proper balancing of these two parts.

Signorina Agazzi's view of children's speech belongs partly to Aporti and partly to Froebel—to Aporti in so far as the nursery school is treated as a preparation for school life proper; to Froebel, in that his kindergarten, too, were meant to "develop the child's faculties *joyously*, through his conversation." Aporti's method fell on evil days in Italy; falsified and degraded, it reduced nurseries to *schools* in the most rigid, impoverished sense of the word. Froebel, on the other hand, was already too far removed from his

original spirit when he reached us. His so-called "gifts" had come to be presented with a volley of stereotyped questions to which the children had to reply; and of course they were learnt by heart, with the appropriate answers, quite mechanically.

Signorina Agazzi came determined to preserve all our worth-while traditions. She did it by restoring the living spirit of their founders.

Games and playthings belong to the children. The teacher should try not to interfere because "her words come between the toy and the child's fantasy, bewildering him."<sup>1</sup> But when it comes to speech training, conversation should "arise naturally out of activity." If the child is alive, his questions will keep the teacher busy all day, and this is where she comes into her own.

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The first step is to help with the pronunciation of the probably considerable vocabulary which the child has already acquired at home. Hearing, sight and muscular control are all involved in the process; the aim is not to make the child self-conscious, but to bring about the active co-ordination of the three. If it is true that language is a means of communication, then the teacher's voice and the expression on her face—"the look of the words on her lips"—are of fundamental importance.

The Agazzi plan needs a teacher with a quiet

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Lingua Parlata*, 2nd edition, p. 6. (The first edition was published in 1901.)

voice, real, motherly eloquence and a genuine desire to help the children to talk. "Well-chosen common objects are of great assistance at the beginning, because their names contain the first elements of speech—vowels, consonants, syllables, accents; and the more attractive they can be made in shape, colour, substance, largeness or smallness, the more eager the little child will be to talk about them."<sup>1</sup>

Children are naturally interested in the appearance and structure of words. They can distinguish for themselves long words and short, easy and difficult, words that sound the same and words that do not. It is surely true that isolated words, out of their context, can be fascinating things to play with, because all children have a little of the philologist in them. You may have to tempt deaf children to experiment with words and build up their interest artificially on rules of spelling and grammar; only deaf children fail to make their own spontaneous observations and confine themselves to the practical problem of communication. The normal child needs no encouragement. How far his natural love of nonsense play can be used to satisfy his other, growing demand for human conversation, must be left to the teacher's sense of proportion.

Signorina Agazzi devotes practically the whole of the nursery school day to the actual business of living; and, naturally, speech is a necessary part of the chil-

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Come intendo il Museo Didattico . . .*, p. 47.

dren's activity. But she does, also, give a little time—an absolute minimum—to the actual teaching of vocabulary. She has invented a series of little, graded lessons on the structure of words, to be fitted in at rare intervals, but with express purpose, among the ordinary talk. She knows that children of this age are attracted by the sounds and shapes of words, and so she gives them, as always, material to experiment with.

There is no getting away from the fact that the words studied will first have to be spoken by the teacher and that her pronunciation will have a specific quality. The subject-matter of the "lessons" must also be left to her, and the way it is treated each time. Signorina Agazzi does suggest a suitable series of talks; but she is not so hide-bound as to prescribe once and for all what is necessary and sufficient, and she makes it clear that every teacher is free to disregard her suggestions and adopt, modify or ignore at will her particular plan for early speech training.

This is one of her own outlines: one day there appears on the show-table (incidentally, the idea of having a show-table in the nursery has lately changed origin, but it belongs in the beginning to the Agazzi plan) a collection containing an apple, some nuts, a pear, a dice, a scarf, a pipe, some bread, beans and salt—all things with two-syllable names [in Italian—M. C. G.] and easy, that is according to the phoneticians, "simple" syllables. The children experiment with the words and discover that each has two parts, requir-



ing a separate opening of the lips. They have already explored monosyllables—orders and summonses and the indications that go with certain gestures like “come up! go away! come down! here! there!”<sup>1</sup> and exclamations, pure and simple, like “oh! ah! oo! ee! hey!” Now they begin to find out about disyllables (they usually enjoy the fun so much that they begin to make illustrations on their own—a process which leads to a good deal of disparity in the length of the words collected!).

Then they examine a display of three-syllabled things: “patata, catena, matita, badile, limone, ditale, sapone.” It will be seen that all these are again easy to pronounce because composed of straightforward syllables; but gradually the exercise gets more difficult and “harder” disyllables appear. In what way is a word harder to say? The children set to work to find out, experimenting with: “libro, palla, zappa, corda, calza” and the harder trisyllables like “ombrello, berretto, carriola, candela, stivale, bottiglia, cuscino, rocchetto,” etc. Then come words that are long but easy: “steccolina, catenaccio, candelieri, mattoncino, allacciabottoni, asciugatoio.”

Another day they consider the position of the accent: “gomítolo, barbabíetola, prezzémolo, garófano, elástico.”

Of the thousands of games that can be played with

<sup>1</sup> All monosyllables in Italian. The rest of the examples I have left in the original.—M. C. G.

words, mimicry is always a favourite. "I know a person who talks like this . . ." says the teacher, imitating some characteristic fault or the clumsiness of muddled, slipshod speech;<sup>1</sup> and everyone roars with laughter and begins experimenting. Then "Let's find a whole lot of words that are like one another"; "Come and read (*sic*) the things in the exhibition, from left to right," she says, and the children come and name them quietly and distinctly.

In many infant schools, written language comes before spoken; children are taught to read from symbols before they have any experience of what the symbols stand for. Sometimes the approach is made doubly artificial and confusing, as in the Montessori method, where children—even normal children—are asked to feel the shapes of raised letters with their fingers or to build up cardboard alphabets.

All this seems to me to be putting the cart before the horse; and it is so easy to make language vivid by letting the children listen, imitate and play with the sounds and words belonging to real things!

The Agazzi nursery school is a preparation for life—and therefore for *school*. No child can do school

<sup>1</sup> Signorina Agazzi puts it very well: "Intentionally and with emphasis, but without exaggeration, the teacher reproduces certain common faults in speech, and contrasts them with the correct, clear and pleasant pronunciation. She speaks, for instance, through clenched teeth, with her head down, confusing her syllables, slurring her consonants, forgetting the final vowel, shouting, or, alternatively, inaudibly. . . ." p. 52.

work until he has learnt how to *live*. Reading and writing can mean nothing to an inarticulate child.

The next stage is "picture-reading," a kind of grammar without rules which can profitably be carried over into the first class of the elementary school. The following is an example of one of the easier exercises:—

*"Picture Reading.* (In Italian, there is a point of grammar in this very phrase, because it contains a singular and a plural: '*La lettura delle immagini.*') The material consists of a piece of packing paper, greenish, if possible, about the size of an exercise book and folded down the middle. In the inside there is, on the left, a picture of a person or thing in the singular; on the right, several of the same person or thing—i.e. in the plural. The child is given the paper and told to look at the left-hand picture and say its name, with the article. For instance: 'A cock.' He then sees the right-hand side and says: 'More cocks' (let him use the phrase he finds most natural for the plural. There is no need to make him say, 'The cock; the cocks': 'a cock; lots of cocks' is just as good).

"The collection should include at least a hundred 'books,' and they can be used in many ways: (1) as eye drill, for passing from the singular to the plural; (2) to give the child a first notion of what reading is, i.e. a movement of the eye from left to right; (3) to

show him how to treat a book properly—this is his first.

“The teacher initiates the lesson herself by explaining some of the sheets. Next time, she distributes the sheets to the children and watches to see how they use them. They are left free to examine their pictures at will and to look at each others’. (See below: Use of the school museum.) But they must return them intact, clean and without dog-ears. Remember, this is more than just speech training; it is a lesson in civilized behaviour, showing the children how to take proper care of their reading and exercise books. It is appreciated, later, in the elementary school.”

Sometimes the lesson consists of an exhibition of pictures, where the aim is to find generic names which will cover the different groups of objects. For example: plants, flowers, toys, animals, furniture, stuffs, kitchen utensils, tools, etc. (Of course, each group is shown separately.)

The choice of wording may vary widely. It may be concerned with the whole and the parts (bean and bean-pod; chair and chair-back; a hat and its crown; a towel and its fringe; plant and stalk; etc.); or with all the different parts of a thing; or with recognizing something by its part. Obviously language lessons often overflow their boundaries and revert to discussing the things used in everyday work and play.

*Fruit, flowers and vegetables, and their seeds*

The young child loves to look at pictures of the flowers and vegetables in his garden. He has sown the seeds himself and gathered the fruits, and has learnt to know and love growing things. Give him a radish seed to examine, together with a picture of a radish, just like the one he once watched growing in his own plot with such pride, and finally cut up into little pieces to share with his friends. . . . The picture is pasted on to cardboard and hung up with a little glass bottle fastened underneath it to hold the seed belonging to it (or, in other cases, the berry or kernel). (Let it be said at once that, as nothing expensive or difficult to obtain is ever used, the bottles are old tubes for Government quinine, collected from various sources.) The placards are arranged as an exhibition round the walls, and the children see them as they come and go, examine them, compare and ask for explanations. It all adds to their experience and gives them further opportunity for talking.

Suitable groups are: the pea and bean families, with their pods; flower seeds and seed-boxes; and vegetables which mature underground like potatoes, turnips, carrots, onions and garlic.

I must not spend any more time on illustrations, much as I should like to quote everything Signorina Agazzi has to say on language teaching in her two books. She has quantities of different exercises to suggest, mostly of Froebelian origin, but freed, of course, from all formality. There are endless games of Happy Families, with pictures of people and things of every kind.

It will be seen at once how, as the activity develops

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out of the first, simple word games, it turns into the language of real life.

Where speech is treated as matter for childish observation and study, it finishes as the expression and counterpart of living experience. It leads on to description, story-telling, poetry, and opens the way to music and all the songs of childhood. *Singing* is the crowning glory of the Agazzi method.

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## SINGING LESSONS ON THE AGAZZI PLAN

Some day, not far distant, it will be considered rank madness to think of teaching music by ear training alone—I mean by making children distinguish between sounds and notes and their different pitch and quality. All that has the same relation to real music as the hideous practice of mixing colours by the colour chart has to painting; in other words, none at all. Of course, it is always amusing to find out how your senses work; but it is not *music*.

Music is one of the commonest forms of self-expression. We use it instinctively to give shape to our emotions. Through music we are able to interpret our vague, exuberant ideas and, from the confusion of echoes which reach us from outside, select what is significant to us.

Sounds have no significance in themselves. They only become significant when we use them to express our thoughts. So that instrumental sounds, although they serve to point and enrich our basic sense of music, are less important than spoken language, which depends on cadence as painting depends on colour tones. For as a uniform wash of grey can hardly be called a picture, so there is no such thing as speech without intonation.

It is the varying inflexion of the voice which constitutes speech—exclamatory, interrogative, beseeching,

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urging, commanding; expressing by turns triumph, joy, amusement, calm, pain, bitterness, desperation, sorrow, politeness, patronage, sympathy, irritation, reproof, irony, admonishment, warning, alarm and so on through an infinity of cases and moods quite impossible to reproduce in writing. (The futurist school in literature has tried in vain to express in print the whole range of the human voice. No signs ever invented can hope to cover it.)

And there are certainly not adjectives enough to describe all the possible tones of voice, though you borrow wholesale from the other senses. You may talk about a sweet voice, a clear or a calm one; a person's speech is confused, broken, hoarse, harsh, rough; biting, cross, cutting; smooth, sharp, fiery, dull, weak, strong—and as many more as you can find; but you cannot exhaust the possibilities.

A child who is left alone with an ear-training apparatus has naturally small opportunity of learning to talk. The organizer of the Children's Houses seems never to have realized the possibilities of ordinary conversation. Hers may be an excellent idea of a house, but it is not a *home*, and it has none of that familiar feeling of everyday life which you would expect to find in a place where the teacher is supposed to be a mother and the other children brothers and sisters.

Now a silent child is of all people most utterly lost when it comes to music. You may give him a whole set of "musical bells" to train his ear (and a very clever invention that is), but he will learn nothing about music.



This fact explains the exceedingly low level of music in most infant schools which, by the same token, have not yet discovered the inestimable value of folk-song, including as it does words as well as tunes, and words closely linked with the language the children use at home.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, infant school music is poor just where it would appear to be (and likes to be thought) most rich: I mean in the favourite practice of walking along a line chalked on the floor, keeping time with rhythmic movements to a tune played by the teacher. It is useful for teaching motor-control, but it provides no opportunity for expression in the musical sense. (When Signorina Agazzi gives it she is content with a tambourine to mark the beats.)

As a matter of fact, children are curiously passive in their attitude to external rhythm. In the cradle they learn to take their mothers' lullabies for granted. At its best, rhythmic movement is a pleasant game, but it is quite distinct from the active enjoyment of real music—making tunes (or remaking them, which is the same thing). Creative work of this kind is perfectly possible in schools, but it must begin with *singing*. To a child, singing is a normal form of expression; it is only another, more exciting kind of speech.

<sup>1</sup> In practice, music has invaded the Children's Houses independently of Madame Montessori. Her method itself makes no allowance for speech or singing, but only for sense-training exercises. And it is greatly to her credit that in this field she has left something to others.

After learning to talk, children should also practise using sounds without words. This will give them some idea of sound values and teach them to speak with the right intonation. "Musical bells" may come in later on, or they may be useful quite apart from the teaching of singing; but infinitely more valuable than they or any other sense-training apparatus from an educational point of view is the process of talking and singing aloud—even if the result lacks technical accuracy.

Important as it is for children to listen to the teacher's voice—I mean, to appreciate and enjoy her singing—it is just as useful for them to listen critically to their own voices, in songs, of course, adapted to their age. Leave out voice training, and you will, indirectly, diminish, if not completely efface, all sense of expression in the other, non-vocal, rhythmic games. A child who sings himself is capable of more lively appreciation in all sorts of directions than a child who merely listens or translates what he hears into movement. I repeat, words set to music are the earliest form of self-expression. That is true for primitive peoples as well as for children, and the child who is allowed to develop to the full his inborn sense of music will easily learn to master its technique.

Of course, listening must always go hand in hand with singing, just as singing is bound to include in itself rhythmic movement. You have only to watch a child singing to see how his whole body keeps time

with the music. The more absorbed he is—that is, the more perfect his control—the more the working of his features, the balancing of his head and every movement of his body combine to help the song.

If this is true, then why make marching and dancing distinct from so-called “passive” music? No child wants to sit still while he is singing.

Signorina Agazzi does not go into such detail as this in her account of the methods she uses for teaching singing to small children, but, roughly, her theory follows these lines.<sup>1</sup>

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Signorina Agazzi is one of the most important precursors of the Gentile Reform by reason of the value she attaches to singing for young children. She has done much to forward its teaching in infant schools, and chiefly through her enthusiasm for *folk-song*. She says: “Whenever, in a country lane or in some quiet street, or from a city workshop bench, I hear a gay young voice singing in tune, happy and unself-conscious, I feel strangely proud, as if the song were an echo of my own, inmost thoughts.”

The joy of real folk-song could hardly be better described.

When I say “real,” I mean accurate as far as the notes are concerned, unforced and, above all, free from false sentiment—the kind of songs that people

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *L'A B C del Canto Educativo*, 1st edition, 1908, p. 7.

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make instinctively to cheer themselves on their way. "Canta, ca ti passa."<sup>1</sup> Signorina Agazzi, in her study of folk-song, was struck precisely by how often, nowadays, a kind of fictitious gaiety enters in, making it somehow aggressive and restless.

Popular education in its fullest sense should help everyone, from the little child onwards, to "realize his own strength" and guard against its abuse. One of the best ways of doing this is to encourage "as a kind of faith, the love of music."<sup>2</sup> The world seems intent on learning to read—and the Children's Houses try to anticipate everyone else, to the delight of proud parents—but few people pay much attention to singing, although it is the most expressive language of all.

I go so far as to say that the chief aim of education should be to foster popular song. It ought to be possible to replace children's slovenly, incorrect singing, "the vulgar element,"<sup>3</sup> by a real appreciation of music. If we could do this, we should have gone far towards making them satisfactory human beings. If we want our children to be live and healthy, we should try to "win over not only their voices but their whole mind and energy to the pure joy of singing."<sup>4</sup>

For all this there is a method, a hygiene of singing. It has two main principles which are part of the Agazzi plan: first, "the child's body and mind must be

<sup>1</sup> Sicilian proverb.

<sup>2</sup> Agazzi: *L'A B C del Canto Educativo*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

perfectly calm and at ease";<sup>1</sup> secondly, he should learn to breathe properly while he sings.

Of course, besides, there is a careful routine to be observed in connection with the position of the body and the shape of the mouth. But it is only routine, and should be treated as such.

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If it is true that singing grows naturally out of talking—is, indeed, itself a kind of talking on another plane—then the best way of teaching it, as well as the most "scientific," is to begin with recitation, so that the children shall know how to speak poetry in a "genuine, meaningful, unaffected way."<sup>2</sup> Why, in modern sense training apparatus, is there so little scope for the child's vocal chords? Surely practice in speaking and hearing, "to make the child's words issue clear and free,"<sup>3</sup> forms an important part of the preparation for singing. The children we teach have been used to play with the sounds of their own voices, from the cradle up.

I do not want "elocution," only a little word practice to catch the children's attention and appeal to their interest for a short time every now and then. And we must not try to do everything at once: "It is one of the chief defects of the kindergarten that they give the children *too much* singing, all at once, in the name of the great teacher who first realized its capital

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *L'A B C del Canto Educativo*, p. 36.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

importance in education." Signorina Agazzi struggles hard against the mechanical rigidity of the degenerate Froebel kindergarten. She agrees that orthophonic exercises, or games, suitably graded, may be used for all the children in an infant school. But she says that the youngest should wait a little, playing listening games only; and then the next in age, as they gradually learn how to extend the range of their voices and to sing in tune, with understanding, may be allowed to tackle real songs as "the spirit moves them."<sup>1</sup> It is the teacher's job to attract the children by "playing and singing for her own amusement," going through the major scale slowly and with obvious enjoyment, "pretending she thinks no one is paying much attention to her. . . ." Then pleasant, short little tunes, sung very softly, take the place of the sol-fa notes—well-known songs and nursery rhymes to suit the mood of the occasion. Thence it is possible to set on foot all manner of games of recognizing and imitating, making like sounds and different ones, and guessing when the tune is going up or down. The little ones, hearing the big children, soon want to do the same, and it is easy to correct mistakes without any hint of formality.

When the teacher shows them how the shape of her mouth alters the sounds she makes, the children are deeply impressed and long to try themselves. "Look," she says, "if I sing with my mouth wide open, I make a sound like this: (too open); if I sing through my teeth something else happens: (too closed); but if I open

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *L'A B C del Canto Educativo*, p. 35.

my mouth in the ordinary way and try not to lift my tongue, the sound I make comes out nice and full and quiet, just as we like it. Now *you* try." She shows them the right position, and every time they sing a note she asks the others to criticize.

As we have seen, the children base their songs on words. Apart from anything else, this should help to give clarity to the separate notes; but it often happens that children who have perfectly tuneful voices for single notes find it very difficult to reproduce a group of notes faithfully because their *memories* for tunes are not developed. Signorina Agazzi aims at strengthening weak memories by taking advantage of individual differences: "The difference in mental growth among the children may be usefully turned to account. The teacher gets the more proficient to sing, and, while they benefit from the practice, the weaker are learning.

"I am sure children are sometimes the best teachers of children. Whether it is that their faculties mature more easily in the more intimate company of their contemporaries, or whether we do not always succeed in meeting them on their own ground, the fact remains that many children learn more from watching and copying the friends they know than in paying attention to us.

"Musical memory should be trained by using very short phrases to begin with, of which the first should be sung to one or two words only."

In order to achieve delicacy of tone, which is a thing much prized in the Agazzi school, the children are

taught to notice the *colour* of their voices. This is done in a simple and ingenious way by neutralizing the tone usually given to the separate vowels: "the hoarse, open sound of the much-abused popular songs" is characterized by its typical "ah," which is the easiest vowel to pronounce, particularly on the middle notes where the muscles of the mouth are free to adopt the most comfortable position; in the same way, the sharp, awkward "i" [ee] may easily prevent good singing; but a broad "u" [oo] coming after "m," helps the child to understand the "position of the vocal chords sounding through the nasal and frontal sinuses, making head notes." And so the very first exercises are sung to "mu" [moo]. "By the simple method of getting high notes on 'mu,' the child is quite capable of understanding that if he wants to reach these notes he must (in his own language) push his voice and breath up, and that his voice in that position acquires a delicate colour which it could never get by saying open sounds.

"After a few voice-colour exercises, the child begins to adapt the other vowels to the pitch by force of habit. (Of course, the teacher is always behind him, although he does not realize it.) So, in his singing, 'i' [ee] loses its sharpness and turns into something like a closed 'u' [as in French—'une']; 'ah,' while preserving its character, goes with a less open mouth, and so on for all the vowels, as they become subordinated to the end in view, the pleasant 'colour' of the voice.

"In the absence of some such training, it is difficult



for the child's vocal chords to sound any notes in the scale higher than 'la,' particularly if they are to be made with open vowels like 'ah' and 'eh.' It is a most painful thing to listen to the strained, discordant high notes which come when people struggle to sing in tune by opening their mouths wider and wider."

With these and other devices—and among them there are very careful breathing exercises—Signorina Agazzi is able to sort out her children into the quick, uncertain and dull. Very gradually, she proceeds to give "voices" to the quick, leading them on semitone by semitone. But she never neglects the uncertain or the dull, who all take part in the games of breathing, speaking, pronunciation and rhythm, and so, in the end, pluck up courage to sing through listening to the efforts of their more accomplished friends.

Listening is a useful part of discernment, and it helps those who are singing by the self-criticism it arouses. The teacher is always anxious to stimulate criticism, and the less musical children, spectators for the time being, understand what is meant and profit by the corrections made.

By degrees, the group of the dull disappears. Gradually the uncertain are assimilated to the quick. A choir comes into being endowed with real musical sensitiveness, which responds to every quiver of the conductor's hand. The rhythm becomes flowing (children's songs with too many staccato notes being in any case avoided). Exercises in vocalizing words and syllables still go on, but the children are always free

to make their own, spontaneous songs, and now their voices ring out clear and natural with no break or jarring note. They stress and colour the phrases on their own account. Singing has become a part of their lives—and now, if you like, is the time for more technical music lessons with instruments and notation.

I believe the infant school of the future will combine the Agazzi music method with some of the more attractive ideas of Signorina Maccheroni, collected and systematized by Madame Montessori. But it is singing which will remain the base and keystone of music, if we remember that music is literally breath of life to a child.

\* \* \* \* \*

Signorina Agazzi has made out a careful scheme for the first steps in musical training. But I do not intend to reproduce that here, because I am not really concerned with the details of the method but rather with giving you some idea of its spirit. How much the quality of the singing in our infant schools owes to her is difficult to say; but it is certain that our present high standard is very largely due to her work. The peculiar charm of the Agazzi method is that it combines singing with ordinary life and outdoor play. In this field it has outrun even Froebel, the great apostle of singing for little children.

Listen to what Signorina Agazzi has to say in her second little volume on music teaching, *Children, Come and Sing*! "Singing games bring joy in the

doing, and, in the same way, song, wedded to work, is able to induce serenity of mind. People who sing softly while they work come to associate their visions with the work of hand and mind. Perhaps some gentle thought enters into the music, driving out the worries of the moment; and the egoist is moved to help his neighbour, the proud to humble himself, the lazy to make an effort and the timid to take courage.

"You will notice that there is never a jarring note in the song of the true worker. Even when the subject is unruly, there is no thought of evil. At such a time the voice is the handmaid of the mind, and the mind, as if moved by some irresistible force, unwittingly casts aside frivolous thoughts and runs in peaceful, rhythmic channels. (It is odd that work, like prayer, seems to require long, sad sounds.) The working hours are the time for folk-song; to feel the need for it is a sign of grace, and to open the way to it is great civility.

"Why then do we not foster it in the schools? Why must we have singing subordinated to the conventional movement of a brick that slips or a rolling ball, when we might have the good old tunes on the lips of children intent on their own, chosen occupations, quiet and happy as a breeze in spring. 'Flowers,' 'Cows,' 'At the window,' 'The cock,' nursery rhymes like these are easy to weave into a singing game and comforting for a person to hum to himself over his happy work. Children love to sing as they work.

"Some rhymes are written in two parts—which does not mean that they cannot be sung with one voice only,

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but that if the teacher is sure of herself, and her voice is not harsh, it will be so much gained if she can join in the children's singing with her own contralto. The guiding principle is that the beautiful in teaching is always good."

When music grows thus in perfect unity with education, it becomes the very flower and expression of free minds at work. Like that, it is infinitely more valuable than separate, analytic exercises in acoustics which are as empty artistically as they are pretentious from a "scientific" point of view.

## QUIET GAMES

### THE INGENUITY OF TEACHERS AND CHILDREN AT THE MOMPIANO NURSERY SCHOOL

MOMPIANO, school of peace. There small children run about all day as nature means them to, but their activity has nothing restless or disjointed in it. They work hard at digging or planting or cleaning, but it is all done smoothly and in order. They are free to play as they like (under supervision, of course, but without any artificial "apparatus") and they never become uncontrolled.

Naturally a life so full of exciting things to do has to be balanced with what Signorina Agazzi calls "quiet games." Sometimes they have little lessons in language, extremely short and hardly recognizable as such at all. They do them with the help of the very simplest material, made up of oddments and needing no patent, as I have explained, and exercises like that are always useful by way of mental gymnastics, to teach concentration. But actually they can easily be overdone, and the more cunning and attractive they are, the greater the danger is.

However, lessons are not the only relaxation in a busy life. The Agazzi method has something to offer which is neither manual work nor lessons (after all, both these, however simple, are serious matters to children). Her "quiet games" need no effort, although

they have to be played with intelligence and always involve some useful training. Surely few educationists have had such fertile imaginations as the Agazzi sisters (Rosa in particular), or have shown such genuine maternal feeling in the schemes they have evolved for amusing children quietly and simply.

To quote one or two of these:

(1) A scrap-book for each child—or more, if he wants them. With very little trouble or expense a single teacher can produce any number, a whole library full. "You have only to take an old bound catalogue from the wastepaper-basket and paste over each page with a picture cut out of an old illustrated paper." Clearly, in a year it is possible to make at least fifty scrap-books.

Each one is distinguished by a picture on the cover indicative of its contents. They are all displayed on a table within the children's reach, and each child is free to choose. (He knows, of course, by the cover, which he has already seen.) Then he settles down, by himself or with one or two others, to look at the pictures.

When the children have finished, they put the books back on the table and take others. All they have to promise is to show each one to the teacher on its way back, to make sure that they have not spoilt it.

How simple it all is, when we consider the poverty of our published children's books! Of course, schools with means can buy attractive picture books, printed on linen, if they like; but teachers choosing these have

to submit to other people's taste, and, worse still, the caprice of commercial taste. The Agazzi teacher would rather remain free from commercial production by making her own material. She will be limited in some ways, but she will be able to have as much as she needs, and, best of all, the children will be able to help her.

I ought to point out that Signorina Agazzi has evolved a little "talk" on the proper management of books, to teach the children how to handle their albums in a civilized way. She tells them the right position for the book, how to turn the pages without getting them "dog-eared," not to wet their fingers in turning the pages and how to do it quickly, still keeping the book in the same position. If only the readers at our public libraries had been pupils at an Agazzi school, how much more would they respect the books they use! Naturally, any old catalogue, time-table, or circular, or other rubbish will come in to illustrate the lesson.

(2) Another good game is the "bag of peas."<sup>1</sup> All kinds of things can be done with peas, and, arranged in ranks, they become children, or soldiers marching in formation, their officers at the side; or they can be used for enclosures or railings round gardens and public squares; or they can simply be made into patterns, embroidered with little leaves and twigs.

(3) Another idea for designs is a box of flowers and

<sup>1</sup> "Lupino" = a large, flat yellow pea, peculiar to some Italian provinces.—M. C. G.

seeds; pumpkin and melon seeds, beans and beech-nuts. "A few pumpkin seeds arranged in a circle, like a daisy, with a yellow pea in the middle, can be made very effective with other daisy-like flowers on a smaller scale, with dark-coloured beans and peas for centres. The stalks can be made out of thin leaves, mimosa or lime, or bits of straw, pine needles or tiny bamboo shoots. There are always goose quills and turkey or chicken feathers to be had—and they are particularly useful because they can be washed."

If all else fails (or indeed, in any case, if fantasy so suggests), the little "pasta" shapes can be used again, and they can be stuck down by gently wetting them on the back. In 1923, at the Florence Exhibition, the stand representing the "Opera Nazionale per l'Italia Redenta" had a splendid collection of children's designs to show, made out of just such simple materials as these.

How much better it all is than expensive stuff bought ready-made from the "specialist"! Unpatented equipment should be the pride of the infant schools, as of all poor scholars. Every infant teacher may have her cupboard full of treasures if she wants to, and all for a few coppers.

(4) And now consider the drowsy heat of summer. The children sit in the shade, looking through a "big picture book" ("big," so that several of them can enjoy it at once). "They find pictures of household utensils, musical instruments, birds, wild animals, and perhaps some of insects, enlarged, beetles, moths



and spiders. The world is a mine of delight to the child and nothing in it is beneath his notice.

"Such times as these are blessed and leave their mark for ever on the minds of children and teacher. Wherever people live close up to nature, without pretence or affectation, they quickly learn to appreciate the common things of life. . . ."

Refreshed in mind, the children fall asleep one by one, as their interest dies and their eyes close, heavy with heat.

(5) Another time, the cook may want help in sifting rice in the kitchen. I have here a very sensible passage from an Agazzi book, a masterpiece of nursery understanding:

"There are many occupations suitable for inducing calm, while at the same time giving practice to hand and eye in some simple, practical job. Of course, I only mean in play; far be it from me to wish to make actual use of these children. It is enough to let them imagine they are sifting the rice which will soon be cooked in the school pots, to give them the joy of thinking they are really helping the cook in her work. As a matter of fact, the teacher keeps a special little bag of rice for distribution, and it is on this that they learn to clean the grains of husks and dirt. With them it is a competition to see who can find bits of Indian corn, grains of rice with the husk still on them or bits of grit. The just pride with which they separate these last, in the knowledge that every little stone extracted may mean a tooth saved!

"In the absence of anything better, the sifting of the rice may be done on pieces of clean paper spread on the table. Personally, I have collected a good number of cardboard cake boxes, which serve the purpose excellently."<sup>1</sup>

(6) Another thing to do is to tear or cut with a paper knife squares of paper for the lavatories. This is a perfectly serious matter. In the Children's House at Mompiano the children of the poor are taught to perform their toilet duties and to take proper care of the places which become all too easily indecent and unhygienic. (You have only to look at the offices of a secondary school to realize how many people, not at all poor, would benefit by some such training.) The affected prudery of some educational reformers famous for their efforts in favour of self-education has made them pass by the school lavatories. . . .

The game of cutting paper has also certain non-utilitarian advantages in that it teaches the children to understand and reproduce geometric forms. A small child nearly always loves to fold paper into equal little squares or long strips, if only because he is always eager to do and make things. Patronizing adults may hardly deign to notice him; yet if only they knew, each pitiful creation represents an artist's agony.

(7) The beginnings of *handwork*. I need hardly say that handwork supersedes all else as a quiet occupation. We all have at our finger-tips a fund of Froebelian material which no one can afford to neglect. But the

<sup>1</sup> Agazzi: *Come intendo il Museo Didattico* . . ."

Agazzi material is very elastic and often supplements Froebel, although, of course, it would never pretend to take his place.

There are quantities of things that children of nursery age are able to produce—little scraps which, to the makers at least, are genuinely useful in work and play. Sometimes, they make toys of lasting value.

A very favourite ingredient is paste, made of flour and water. (Pasting provides useful practice in keeping clean, if nothing else!) The material needed is, again, of no value: little tin lids for holding the paste, pieces of paper and scraps of cardboard. . . . And there is no ingenuity needed except that which goes with all primitive play. In Signorina Agazzi's latest book, *Handwork for Little Hands* (1927),<sup>1</sup> she has taken care to keep everything perfectly natural by avoiding expense—as well as all waste of stuff, however worthless.

(8) I could go on with the list indefinitely, and again and again the points of contact would be obvious between the Agazzi "quiet games" and the constructive play of the Decroly method. A serious comparison of the two would make an interesting thesis. I must conclude by drawing attention, in passing, to the games of "lotto," "pretence-reading" and "shopping," all of them as attractive as they are sensible from the point of view of developmental play; and to one occupation of a very simple kind which will play a really useful part in the life of any poor family: the business of

<sup>1</sup> *Il Lavoro delle Piccole Mani.*

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undoing knots, disentangling and rolling up string. The children know they are doing something real, and they love it.

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Every child at Mompiano has his own private box, kept in his table drawer, to hold the material he needs for "quiet games." "He is responsible for its safe keeping, and once a week he brings it out for a grand polishing and dusting—not forgetting the table and drawer themselves. Of course, the children arrange their belongings as they like, and the consequence is that they are always open to suggestions from the teacher."

\*           \*           \*           \*           \*

Through the number and elasticity of her devices, Signorina Agazzi is saved from too much *method*. Her books are meant as a record of her own work, merely, not as solemn principles of teaching. And so they should be an inspiration to every infant teacher of resource.

## II

### NATURALISTS AT PORTOMAGGIORE

AN EDUCATIONAL EXPERIMENT BY RINA NIGRISOLI  
DURING THE YEARS 1919-25



## CHAPTER I

### THE EDUCATION OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST

I FIRMLY believe that you will find more of the real science of teaching in folk-lore, in old legends of saints and heroes and in the simple stories of great men, scholars as well as soldiers, than in any number of treatises on education.

People talk a great deal nowadays about the "activity school" and "self-expression," and the necessity for respecting children's natural spontaneity. I hesitate to think how much and how often I have done so myself.

Actually, I know nothing better on the subject than an old, popular manuscript, "The Life of St. John the Baptist," by Fra Domenico Cavalca. . . .

St. John, as a little child, loves being in his father's garden:—" . . . When the time came that he could go up and down stairs by himself, he would very often betake himself into his father's fields, or garden, which lay behind the house, and there he would amuse himself, wandering about and maybe picking little flowers from time to time as he ran through the garden, singing his own songs . . .

" . . . Sometimes he would sit quietly, watching the sky and the earth and all the things that God had made; and he was so happy in this, although

only a little child, that he seemed not to want to go home. . . .”

His parents are full of wonder at the Blessed Child's genuine searchings after beauty; so that, although he often stays long away from them, making them anxious, they try not to thwart him but rather join in his activities themselves, gently “guiding his curiosity” . . . “and his father and mother sent him out to see what he could find, and themselves went with him joyfully; and when they saw a fair tree in blossom, they would call him, saying: ‘Come here, little son, and look at this lovely thing that God has made’; and then they would sit down and set him in the midst of them and begin to sing the Benedictus. . . .”

The child spends a life of sheer joy out of doors among the bright creatures of the sun and air and water, plants and birds and animals. The more he searches, the more he finds in them the marks of Divine loveliness. So he goes on exploring his world, and his wonder grows as he discovers signs of a Supreme Harmony in all things animate and inanimate:—

“. . . Sometimes he would come home hungry and his mother would reprove him gently, saying: ‘Little son, why do you not come home more often? Oh, why do you go so far?’ And the blessed boy would answer: ‘Mother, I have seen so many lovely things that the Lord God has made, that I know not how to come away; and the further I go, the more beautiful I find them.’ . . .”

The attraction of solitude, when everything is so



full of meaning to him, leads the little St. John further and further from home. His parents do nothing to stop him; but, as is the way with children, he always feels he must share his discoveries or he would not be able to enjoy them himself:—

“ . . . As soon as the blessed child entered in (to the wood), there came to him an odour of solitude, so that he felt as if he were in a kind of paradise where he should rest. And he looked at the trees above, all fresh and green, and at the earth beneath, covered, as it were a meadow, full of divers flowers, and there he fell to praising God, and he set himself to gather those flowers which seemed to him most beautiful, searching ever further afield and finding ever fairer ones. The more he advanced, the more new and lovely ones he discovered, and already he had so many that he could not hold them in his lap. He gathered up the skirt of his jacket and picked flowers and put them in his lap; and all the time he praised God, crying aloud that he would take these flowers to his father and mother. And when his skirt was full and he saw that the time when he should return home was already past, he came away, singing, so fast that he seemed like a bird, flying. . . .

“His mother was waiting for him, and when she saw how late he was she became anxious, and prayed God that He would send him back to her safely. She sent out all the members of her household to look for him, ‘and if you find him, carry him back on your shoulders, for he may well be tired.’ And she stood

at the window, watching if she might hear or see him anywhere. And as she stood thus, she heard the boy's voice. . . .

"And at once the boy knelt before her, saying: 'Forgive me, Mother (for being away longer than usual), because I have found the most beautiful things to-day and I wanted to bring some back to you and to my father; therefore I went still further on, and yet I could not get enough to satisfy me.' . . ."

Then St. John tells his father about it:—

"'I went into a certain place and saw a wood beyond and there came to me a longing to go there. I went and found no one there, and I went in and saw that it was the most beautiful place that ever I saw, and I saw the green trees and the birds singing; on the ground I saw fair flowers, and there was no one there but I, and I went right into the wood and would gladly have stayed there but that I wanted to come back to you.'"

In the wood he finds, as I love to quote, "unwitting playfellows" to amuse him: every kind of little animal, each with its own charm: "And he began to discover the little creatures that lived in the wood, and he ran at once to them and took them and set them on his knee and made friends with them, saying: 'These are things which the Lord God has made' . . . and he saw how beautiful they were, and he held them for a time and played with them and let them go. . . ."

The author of the legend goes on to imagine the little boy's conversations with his parents in the evening, after the day's activities:—

“The child always came home in the evening, bringing back new things that he had found to his father and mother; and he told them what had happened, how he had found the little animals and how they had stayed with him, on his knees and round about him.”

And this is how the boy told his story:—

“‘I lay down in the most lovely meadow that ever I saw, with the most lovely flowers, and I was so happy praising God who had made it all. . . .

“‘And there was on one side a bush with low branches and thick leaves, and I crept in underneath, and it was like being in a little house; and I remembered the songs I had learnt, and I sang them all; and the birds answered me with the most beautiful songs that ever I heard and praised God with me. But I could not do much because I did not really understand.’ And he asked his mother: ‘Can the birds understand?’ and his mother said: ‘Yes, little son, if God so wishes.’ And the child said: ‘Very well, then, I shall pray the Lord God that He will make *me* understand too.’”

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE AND METEOROLOGY AT PORTOMAGGIORE

A PORTOMAGGIORE child is rather like Cavalca's St. John.

From the very first days of this garden school, the children kept a kind of observation note-book. I have beside me the records covering the period from 1919 to 1925 and can follow the gradual development of the entries from bare statements to what are often vivid descriptions.

The first are very brief, but already they have a distinctive character. They all seem to centre round *sunlight* and *movement*, as if these were looked upon as the supreme good. They are interesting because they show how the suggestive influence of the teacher is used and felt in the garden setting of the Portomaggiore school.

It is a pity the notes cannot appear in their original, childish form. There is something very attractive about children's work in its early stages. But the teacher, herself only at the beginning of her experiment, was careful never to put down on paper anything which had not first been "talked over" with a view to finding better words or correcting dialect. To me, this method is all too reminiscent of the ordinary elementary school,

with its insistence on "style" and exact wording. It is usually false and may lead to pedantry; but I am prepared to excuse it at Portomaggiore where, all through the five years of the experiment I am about to describe, the work is inspired by a genuine, absorbing interest in the subject-matter.<sup>1</sup>

The very early diaries—just a line or two a day—vary little and are entirely concerned with weather:—

1919: "Bad weather—cold—grey sky."

"Fine day—sky blue—*mild*." (Perhaps "mild" was suggested instead of a dialect word like "dolca.") "Warm breeze."

But when spring comes the children already begin to add remarks of their own. After all, the weather means a good deal to them:

1920. *April 23*: "Cloudy. The roads are muddy." (Oh dear, no walk to-day!" suggests the diary.)

From time to time, too, the daily bulletin gives the local news, according to the season:

*March 29*: "There are white flowers on the pear-trees and pink flowers on the apples. Little petals come fluttering down."

Then come exciting discoveries made on country walks:—

*April 8*: "The swallows have come. The lime-trees in our lane are covered with little leaves. The sycamores are in flower. The roses have got buds on them."

<sup>1</sup> In the extracts I shall quote I have italicized the words where, as it seems to me, the teacher has been too zealous in her assistance.

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*April 20:* "We put on our white hats."<sup>1</sup>

"Work" and play are all the same to these April children:—

*April 23:* "To-day we *picked the first rose.*"

*April 24:* "Yesterday we began the song about the rose."

*April 28:* "Lots of roses are in flower."

*May 22:* "The yucca is in flower."

Such are, in fact, "first lessons": observation, and learning the names of things. But the names are never *provided* unasked; they are *needed* at the right moment. The word "yucca," for example, could never have appeared in the children's books this year before the 22nd of May. The word "store," in the same way, comes in appropriately on May 4th:—

"The bees are beginning to *store* their honey."

*June 5:* "Fine day. Cool. The oleanders are *unfolding* their first flowers." ("Unfolding"! What a grand word! What a wonderful teacher we have," think the children.)

Then there is the excitement of the garden, where there is a summer-house, covered with roses:—

*May 14:* "Fine weather. Our little house is *blooming* all over with roses. The honeysuckle is in flower."

*May 24:* "Fine. The hut was blooming with white roses, now it is *covered with* little pink ones."

The hated rain, which, in winter, made the roads muddy and deprived the children of the joy of running about outside, now, at the end of May, is much wanted, and has become the "beautiful rain":—

<sup>1</sup> Summer dress at the garden school.

May 31: "*The beautiful rain is falling. How the plants are enjoying themselves! The doves spread their wings to make the most of every drop.*"

After the rain, great discoveries:—

June 1: "Fernanda has found a little toad behind a ditch."

But when school opens again for the winter, the cold weather has come back and the children are forced to stay indoors again:—

November 29: "Misty day. Sky pale grey. . . ." "We stayed at home<sup>1</sup> all day, drawing and building."

December 1: "Danilo has made a lovely building (*sic*) of an engine."

December 6: "Rainy. Giorgio and Danilo have made a swing that works. Gino, Ario, Andreina, and Fernanda and I looked at books that Signorina Rina gave us."

People say that to talk about the weather is stupid and only belongs to conventional conversation between strangers who have nothing to say to one another. But if you look through the diaries representing the *second year* at the garden school, you will find an undercurrent of real poetry connecting up the bare statements. Take, for example, all the entries referring to sun and light:—

In winter the sun is a most important person. He

<sup>1</sup> By "home" they always mean "school." Splendid! When all children, in talking about their school, come to say "at home" for the opposite to "out of doors," the activity school will have triumphed.

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is brought in again and again, and wherever he is concerned the weather notes take on new colour. You have only to glance at one or two headings from Elvezia's second-year diary:—

*1920. October 23:* "To-day sun and clouds."

*October 25:* "This afternoon the sun shone brightly."

*November 9:* "The sun came back to-day and everything is much nicer."

*November 19:* "A beautiful day. It was lovely in the playground."

*December 3:* "The greenhouse window is wide open. The acacia loves the sun."

*December 8:* "The bad weather has gone. The sky is blue again."

*December 13:* "Fine. The acacia can enjoy the sunshine again to-day."

*December 22:* "Oh, lovely sun!"

*December 29:* "There was a little sunshine to-day."

*1921. January 12:* "Sun yesterday, mist to-day."

*January 14:* "It is warm and there is a pale sun."

*January 18:* "It is cold but fine."

*January 21:* "Lovely sun yesterday, lovely sun to-day. We had a nice time in the garden."

*January 22:* "To-day we were out all the time in the sun."

*January 25:* "Sunny." (Quite enough to show appreciation of a fine day.)

*January 28:* "Hurrah for the sun! It is shining again to-day. Soon we are all going out to rake."

Summer comes back, with unbroken sunshine.



The children are satisfied, and their entries follow one another in calm succession, without any particular enthusiasm. They simply say "To-day was fine," or still more shortly, "Fine," or they say nothing about it at all.

If the children's sun-worship were just conventional rhetoric, it would be sure to come in at the wrong time. As it is, it appears at the proper time only—in the winter. When the sun is always there, there is no need to talk about him, and he duly disappears from the diaries.

Of course, the exact opposite happens to the clouds. As soon as they cease to be a regular part of the weather, they become worthy of notice; but in the winter they arouse small wonder or delight, and are recorded as tersely as possible: "A cold, cloudy day" (October 20, 1920).

Sometimes, of course, the children go further, and express a definite dislike of dull days. They can describe the weather in a way that shows at once the mood of the writer:—

*November 30:* "Cloudy and foggy. The roads are muddy." Details about "muddy roads" and "fields too wet" become a kind of refrain: "Always at home, we can't go out."

Luckily, home is full of activity and interesting games:—

*December 7:* "Rainy. The roads are muddy. We did a lot of very good drawings and Vittore learnt a song backwards."

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Then, as spring approaches, the clouds take on new glory. Listen to this:—

1921. February 16: "The sky is covered here and there with little white clouds. Brightness like this is good for the plants after the rain."

April 21: "Big white clouds are *spread out* (this is undoubtedly a correction of the teacher's) in a blue sky."

April 27: "To-day the sun has *conquered* yesterday's clouds."

And again, to complete the cycle, the dreaded rain of winter is hailed as a sign of life:—

May 25: "It rained a little tiny fine rain."

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You will notice how the same children, from their third school year onwards, begin to give *colour* to their weather records, and how these become more and more literary in form:

Little Marta, of whose work I am sorry to have only a few pages, writes:—

1921. February 25: "How really beautiful it was this morning to see the sun coming out. It came out from behind two lovely little white clouds." And again:—

November 14: "To-day the sun beat down on the balcony, on the yellow and green robinia leaves." "How lovely the lane looks in the frost."

1922. January 16: "When my Grandfather got up, he said to me: 'Ario, do you know there's snow on the ground?' I got dressed quickly and went to look.

It was quite true; and I said: 'How beautiful the snow is!' "

This same Ario loves to "listen to the silence" on snowy days when the faintest sounds can be heard:—

"As I was coming along yesterday evening, I heard the 'ton, ton, ton' sound of night-time. How lovely it sounds in the silence of the snow."

Then, gradually, colour begins to come in, with a lively instinct for description:—

*May 13*: A little girl called Elvezia: "How lovely the sun looks through the mist! It is like a pale pink circle."

And here is real pageantry:—

*June 14*: "A shining white cloud melted bit by bit like snow in the sun."

"This morning, while I was dressing, I saw an orange cloud with little blue spots."

To me, there is something *vital* here—not in the actual words (they are in any case too much corrected); but in the fact that *little children are watching the sky*, and pausing in wonder, as St. John did, in the "Life," when he stood perfectly still "gazing at the earth and the sky."

\* \* \* \* \*

It is the beginning of the fourth school year, and the two small girls Fernanda and Elvezia emerge more and more as colour artists:—

*1922. November 23*: "To-day everything is wrapped

up in mist—trees, houses, hedges, fields and people; we can't see anything; only mist, mist, mist." (Fernanda.)

1923. *January 12*: "To-day there is a wind like a whirlwind. In some places trees have fallen down. Last night you couldn't sleep for the wind and rain. This morning the poor little sparrows are all ruffled and untidy. It is muddy." (Elvezia.)

Nevertheless, they are all beginning to enjoy the spring, and one little boy gives this excellent picture of a dream told him by a friend:—

*February 1*: "The trees are all bare. The robinias in the lane have been lopped off ever so short. For three days everything has been *wrapped* in dense fog. But last night Belletti had a dream about spring. He dreamt that he came to school, and when he got to the gate he saw that the lane was all green. The robinias were fat like baskets and covered with leaves and all the little leaves were bright green. On every robinia there was a goldfinch with a little red head and yellow wings and a tail much longer than they really have. They sat there for a little and then, frrr . . . they flew across to the robinias on the other side. That meant that they crossed in the middle and it must have looked lovely. . . ."

All the things these children like "look lovely" . . . It is their only way of conveying their impressions of colour, and they use the same words for the fine new ribbon in a sister's hair or the new shawl over Mummy's head: "It looks lovely!"

March 14: "The garden *looks lovely* with the trees<sup>1</sup> all in bud. They have sprayed them with sulphur."

1921. April 8: "During the holidays the trees have grown so beautiful, with their little, baby green leaves, ever so small. *They look lovely.*"

June 15: "The yucca *looks lovely* with its little, pale yellow flowers. They are like little bells, all ready to begin *pealing*."<sup>2</sup>

June 24: "The star *looks lovely*. . . ." (They are talking about a flower-bed in the form of a star, a source of special pride to the gardeners.) "The star *looks lovely* all full of flowers. (There are) red mallows, different coloured poppies, pale mauve petunias and white petunnias (*sic*)." That is the hymn of the "meadow, full of divers flowers," spoken of in Cavalca's "Life." And the "odour of solitude" is there too. Listen to Fernanda enjoying the silence:—

"Yesterday evening there was a great quietness<sup>3</sup> in my yard. The only thing to be heard was the chirping of a little cricket."

Now a page by Gino, describing how he watched an effect of light in the evening:—

"Yesterday evening I was sitting outside my door. My window looked as if it was lit up. It was a lamp which came over (*sic*) the hedge and the light shone into my window."

<sup>1</sup> Literally: "trees of Heaven." Though botanically correct, the name sounds pedantic in English.—M. C. G.

<sup>2</sup> Naturally "peal" is a word provided by the teacher.

<sup>3</sup> How much better than just "silence"!

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And Ario the musician says:—

"This morning early, when I was in bed, I heard the bell ringing for early Mass. It sounded lovely in the silence."

Like every normal child, Ario wakes up every morning to a world full of adventure. He writes again:—

1921. *January 4*: "Early this morning, when I was dressing, I saw the campanile clock still lit up. It *looked lovely* in the reddish light."

Gino says:—

"Yesterday evening I was sitting outside my door, looking at a next-door house. It *looked lovely* in the moonlight. All at once I heard the cricket singing."

With minds alive to all the sounds and colours round them, these children have an almost sacred awe of the beauty of created things. In other words, religion makes for scruples, and the next step comes when Elvezia writes:—

*March 14*: "This morning, as I came to school, I saw a lovely white daisy at the other side of a ditch. The tips of its petals were pale pink. I said, 'Shall I pick it?' and then I thought, and said, 'No, I won't pick it, it's so beautiful.' "

## CHAPTER III

### UNWITTING PLAYFELLOWS

"AND he began to find the little creatures . . . and he ran at once to them and took them and set them on his knee and made friends with them, saying: 'These are the things which the Lord God has made' . . . and he saw how beautiful they were, and he held them for a time and played with them and let them go. . . ."

Thus Cavalca's St. John; and every child has something of St. John in him. Certainly the Portomaggiore children have, as we see them through their writings:—

*1920. June 28:* "Just beside us, there is a sweet little bird *twittering*.<sup>1</sup> Giorgio found it among the lilies of the valley."

*June 30:* "The little bird was a black-cap. He died. We didn't know what a black-cap was like and we didn't give him the proper food."

*July 19:* "This evening we are going to stay and watch the sparrows going to bed in their nests in the robinias in the lane opposite."

The garden school is loud with the song of birds and the air is full of the beating of wings. In such a paradise, every day brings new discoveries.

<sup>1</sup> As I have already stated, all words obviously suggested or corrected by the teacher are italicized.

1921. May 13: Fernanda:—"The nightingale is singing his little, happy tunes into the air. To think that there are little boys who try to steal the nest the nightingale has made in our garden!"

1922, January 4: Ario:—"As soon as I came out I saw lots and lots of sparrows in the road. They looked lovely. When people came past in carriages, they all flew away into a beautiful garden, behind a little wall."

April 19: "We were gathering twigs to stick in the places where we had planted seeds, when we heard Elvezia say in an excited voice: 'I've found a bird's egg.' We ran to see. The egg was pale blue with dark spots. It was a blackbird's."

May 5: Elvezia:—"Giorgio has found a nest. It is a goldfinch's. It is beautifully woven out of hairs and roots and feathers, with threads of moss *showing green against the grey*. Yesterday morning a goldfinch was sitting there in peace, but a little boy must have pulled her nest down."

May 9: They all make a note of a story of Ario's:—"This morning Ario was in bed and he heard a *twittering of swallows*. He got dressed and went downstairs and out of the door. The road was empty and quite quiet. The swallows were singing away on the electric wires. Ario was very much excited by the *sweet, joyful song*." (The words italicized could never have been made up by young children.)

May 20: A delicious page. Ario was going past the tall robinias which border the road:—"I heard a humming of bees, and I looked up and saw three little



swallows flying round and round the robinias as if they were playing with the bees."

*June 20:* Great excitement. They are nursing a little, orphaned swallow which was found hurt and abandoned. A child had come in with a nest; and Elvezia writes:—"Inside the nest there is a poor little swallow. Her left wing is broken.

"You can see she is young because her tail is hardly forked at all and the blue of her back and the red on her head and throat are only pale. This morning we had a fly-hunt for her. Poor little thing, she was so good, opening her beak and swallowing the flies we brought her."

*November 26:* There are not many songs now, and most of the nests have long been deserted:—"Far, far up in the bare lime-trees we saw lots of little empty nests."

At this stage the school doves take first place in the records. One day the teacher says: "Write down what you are looking at—describe something interesting that you can see." Several rather striking little accounts result:—

*November 20:* "While we are writing, I can see a beautiful dove perched on the ledge above the staircase door."

We can always make a picture if we want to, merely by looking. We do more than *see*, we *create* with our eyes, because every time we use them we unconsciously select and interpret. Thus sight is more than just a bodily function, and the "sense of vision" is not enough

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to describe it. For, at times, all the human senses transcend sense.

*November 22:* "While we are writing, we can hear a rustling of wings. We look up and see that it is the doves coming to sit on the edge of the balcony."

\* \* \* \* \*

At the beginning of the school year the children are not only eager to see their teacher when they come back to school, but their chickens and hens, the magpie and all the rest of the "unwitting" playfellows of last year:—

### *First page of Fernanda's Diary, 1922-23*

"To-day we stood round with grain in the hollows of our hands and called the doves, tweet, tweet, tweet. And frrr—frrr—the doves came flying in amongst us and began quietly pecking. It didn't seem long to them since they last saw us."

In winter the feeding of the birds is a school ceremony.

*1923. February 3:* "Winter is hard for poor people and for the birds."

"The little birds are watching on the trees and roofs. Whenever someone throws food to the hens, they go and join the hens at once, and if anyone throws out scraps, they begin pecking at once."

*February 3:* Elvezia:—"Fernanda's aunt, Auntie Giuglielmina, loves birds. Every morning she puts

out two handfuls of grain on the window sill, and the birds come in crowds, and even in the room you can hear the tapping of their hard, strong beaks. This morning a little sparrow got shut in on the landing. It flew here, there and everywhere looking for a hole to get out, and knocking its little head against the window panes. Fernanda's aunt heard it flapping about and called Fernanda to come and see, and she came and saw the *wild fluttering* of the little sparrow. Then she opened a window, and frrrrr . . ., it flew out, right past Fernanda's head. . . ."

\* \* \* \* \*

Of course they keep animals at the Portomaggiore garden school. It is not exactly a technical business, as in certain "modern schools," which have all the appearance of agricultural stations; far from it. But even at this distance in time and space we can gather a wealth of useful knowledge from the children's diaries:—

Fernanda:—"Yesterday evening, when I was playing, I saw Signorina Rina coming away from the Signori Ravaglia's and going to feed the peacock, and I ran after her."

*February 10:* Elvezia:—"We must be quick and buy two guinea-pigs."

*February 22:* "We have got the guinea-pigs. Fernanda's uncle brought them."

*March 8:* "Yesterday the carpenter brought the hutch for the guinea-pigs."

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October 30: "This morning one of our little chickens came into school."

"A little time ago, while we were doing our lessons, a little American hen came up and walked round us clucking."

December 14: "Yesterday we saw the American hen fly up on to the tool cupboard to lay her eggs."

1923. April 28: Under this date I find a story of Elvezia's, written down in his book by a friend, with the conscientious remark: "Made up and written by my friend Elvezia." It is called: "The Stand, the Vase and Marchina" (Marchina is the name of the American hen). As a composition, it is a joy.

*The Stand, the Vase and Marchina*

"At school, at the side of the downstairs hall, we have a room which we call the 'little green room' because of the colour of its walls.

"In one corner of the room there is a stand with a vase on top of it. The stand and the vase are made of plaster. One day Marchina flew behind the vase. Signorina said: 'Oh, she will break my vase! Oh dear, oh dear!'

"But she didn't break the vase. She laid an egg behind it. She laid one, two and then lots of eggs, and began to sit on them. To-day the chickens were born. Their feathers are pale yellow and they have sweet faces and little, short beaks, and they all say

cheecheechee-chee.' They lift up their little in the nest just like baby swallows."

There are endless references to the school dog, another inseparable friend. Here are one or two, to give some idea of what they are like:—

10. *October 20*: "Gulu has come home dripping and dirty, with two cuts."

11. *October 23*: "Gulu has got a deep cut in his right

12. *December 2*: "Yesterday, after dinner, Signorina came into the hall and heard a 'clap, clap' behind her and she turned round and there was poor Gulu with a hurt paw."

Gulu is always in trouble! He is too much of a playfellow."

15. *October 13*: Vittore:—"Febo came in bleeding all wet. Poor thing, I wonder what he has been doing? He is terribly hungry! He has eaten a saucepanful of soup and then drunk almost a whole bucket of milk. We have put him to sleep in the cloakroom on a pile of sacks."

Gulu is the favourite with them all, big and little, is the goat, the playfellow of the babies in the nursery school and the hero of countless stories:—

23. *March 4*: (Class 4):—"Yesterday the little boys from the nursery school had their first walk of the year. Among their pink overalls, we could see our gleaming white.<sup>1</sup> They ran and jumped all round

<sup>1</sup> Teacher's phrase.

her. Signorina Ida has given them the goat to take care of. They take her out to feed and keep her pen nice and clean. They are trying to teach her some tricks, because we have read in the animal book that goats are clever creatures and soon learn to imitate the things you teach them. They grow very fond of their masters, like dogs. In Spain they train goats to take the flocks of sheep to the fields and back again."

Care and affection for the animals living in the school garden breeds in these children a genuine interest in their weaker fellow-creatures. There is no sentimental nonsense about it. The interest is apparent all over the place in the diaries of the third, fourth and fifth years. I will limit myself to three more extracts, one about an "intelligent dog" and two about a goldfinch, the special friend of young Vittore:—

1922. *April 10*: Elvezia:—"We used to know a dog called Colombo. He belonged to a neighbour, but he was always coming to our house to play with our two dogs. He was like Gulu. His hair was long and white and curly, and he had a fluffy tail. His face was always happy, and when anyone called he always got ready for a game. He was very young and playful.

"He has been missing for several days. This morning Signorina told me that he is dead. His masters killed him. They killed him because they didn't want to spend money on a muzzle for him. Poor dog! He was so happy when he was alive."

1922. *January 27*: Vittore:—"Yesterday, when I was standing by the fire, my goldfinch was singing

beautifully, as if he was calling someone. My Granny said: 'What does that bird want?' I went and took down the cage and put it on the table, and I looked in and saw that there was no water."

1925. *October 17*: Vittore:—"Every morning I clean my goldfinch's cage and put fresh seed into his little bowl, and he comes hopping to have his food. He is very happy. Then, when I have washed his little drinking bowl, I fill it with fresh water and put it back in the cage. I have hardly taken my hand out again before there is a great splashing of water. It is the goldfinch having his bath. He spreads out his feathers, and then sits down (*sic*) in the water and flaps his wings. Then he gives a little flutter and is up on his perch again. He has a good shake, and then he begins cleaning under his wings, round his neck and everywhere with his beak. Then he flies down and begins to eat his hemp seeds. He makes a terrible noise, almost as bad as an air-gun going off—cheek! cheek! cheek!"<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This page is the culmination of five years at the garden school. As a child's piece of work it could hardly be better; but as I follow Vittore's compositions from the beginning, I can see how gradual the progress has been.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TAWNY DOVE

AMONG the creatures at the garden school is one which, for three years running, is often mentioned by the children in the records of their daily doings: a tawny dove. I have amused myself by preparing a sort of "life" of this bird, putting together different accounts and references from the first class (1919-20) to the third (1921-22). The result will serve at least to strengthen the thesis of one of my college pupils in her study of "Children and Animals." She says: "Where will you find a more vital centre of interest, or more rich in possibilities, than an animal? It brings into being a whole world of new images, it rouses scientific curiosity in other forms of life, and breeds affection and sympathy in the children. And yet animals, the natural companions of children's work and play, are, in fact (or, at least, were) kept exiles from school! We ought to give our new schools aviaries and hutches and kennels, and a piece of ground where an animal can live. Or, if that is impossible, at least let us see to it that children of all ages are free to tell us about their own pets and their other favourite animals. Then we shall see our children come alive. They will develop that gentle, meditative understanding for the animal world which is so often the basis of great literature."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Bambini e Animali," by Elda Mazzoni, from *La Tecnica Scolastica*, December 3, 1925. Piacenza, Società Tipografica Edit. Porta.



1920. April 11: "Two doves are building a nest in the hall,<sup>1</sup> the tawny female dove and the black male dove. The male dove brings bits of straw."

April 16: "The nest is finished."

April 17: "Yesterday the tawny dove laid a little egg."

May 7: "At midday the tawny dove's baby was born."

May 25: "The tawny dove's baby has grown big and is beginning to take little walks through the hall. The doves (the parents) are tame enough now to eat out of our hands."

June 1: "Fulva's<sup>2</sup> little dove is exploring everywhere, indoors and out of doors."

June 9: "Fulva's little dove has died."

June 24: "The tawny dove is wondering where to build another nest."

July 12: "The tawny dove has made a nest under the veranda steps."

July 26: "This morning the tawny dove flew right over our heads, almost on to our exercise books."

1921. February 25: Elvezia:—"To-day, at dinner, the tawny dove and two white friends came in through the window and ate the crumbs which we threw on the ground. Then that wretch of a Fulva flew on to

<sup>1</sup> The entrance hall on the ground floor. In one corner the two doves chose to build their first nest, away from the other school doves (about 30) which built in a dovecote.

<sup>2</sup> "Fulva" means "tawny," and is sometimes used by the children as a proper name—M. C. G.

the bread basket; but she upset it and flew away quickly."

Up till now, there is nothing of particular interest. These quotations are simply a series of descriptive commentaries—direct descendants, as it were, of the old exercises in rhetoric, which our ancestors practised in classical times. But by degrees familiarity with living things begins to stir a certain imaginative consciousness in the children's minds, as we can see in these two quotations from Ario:—

1922. *January 11*: "The tawny dove has been away for two days. Perhaps a huntsman<sup>1</sup> has killed her. Last night I dreamt that little Fulva was flying about above my head. I was so glad to see her again."

*January 14*: "The other night I dreamt that we were sun-bathing in the meadow. The doves were flying up above, carrying grain to a field, and among them was our dear tawny dove. She has not come home yet."

This is the moment to read to the children the wonderful story of the pigeons in Thompson Seton's *Animal Heroes*.

<sup>1</sup> "Cacciatore." The "huntsman" who shoots birds of all kinds was, until lately, a familiar figure all over Italy.

## CHAPTER V

### THE DAY'S WORK AT THE PORTOMAGGIORE GARDEN SCHOOL

IT is time we learnt rather more about the school and its history.

I feel I have a rather special, personal link with it, by virtue of a certain "Envoi" written by me in 1913 as a concluding chapter to my *Lectures on Teaching*. In it I said:—

"Anyone, student or amateur, who reads this book must know that he may, in all seriousness, make at least one new friend if he likes. If he will only write and tell me about his experiments, his disappointments and triumphs, I shall always be ready to listen.

"If it could be done, I should like to build up, not so much a circle of 'grateful readers,' as a kind of family of teachers—people who, in their books and their lessons, would be able to write and teach in the knowledge that a whole company of distant, unknown friends was ready to listen with sympathy and approval. To this family, now at work in elementary and secondary schools, I send an exile's greeting; for I look back to these, from my university, as to my own, true schools, where I was trained and whence sprang what little strength there is in my present work. I salute you, in the words of Guido Cavalcanti, from the most lovely of his ballads:

Questa vostra servente  
Viene per star con vui,  
Partita da colui  
Che fu servo d'amore."

And then, one day in 1924, when I was working on the School Reform with Gentile, I received this letter:—

"Five years have passed since, at the end of your *Lectures on Teaching*, I paused in delight and some hesitation, at the invitation in the 'Envoi.' I was that very year starting an experiment with an elementary school, and you will understand how eager I was to answer that kind voice. 'Yes,' I said to myself, 'I will write and tell him about it.' Now, to-day, I am keeping my promise.

"The experiment is drawing to a close. We began under perfect conditions and we were full of high courage; there were difficulties as we advanced, but we overcame them. I did not then suspect the blow that was in store for us in the death of my brother, to whose inspiration I owe whatever grace is in my work.

"The enclosed diaries, together with my notes, will show you better than anything else could how it all turned out.

"To explain the origins of the school, I will quote the report which I sent two years ago to the *Commisario Prefettizio* of the Commune, Dr. Luigi Pisanò, then chief Prefect of Ferrara. (The school owes its existence to him.)



PLANTING BULBS. AUTUMN 1932



"It began in October 1919, after my sister and I had been here for ten years in charge of the infant school—'the sweet, green place where a baby comes straight from his mother's arms and from which he goes on into the big school laughing and happy and decked with flowers.' The Portomaggiore infant—*nursery*—school had, I think, become just such a sweet, green place, to the grateful joy of the inhabitants, when they saw that the dreary old guard-room they had known was a thing of the past.

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"But then it occurred to me: why not have an ordinary elementary school housed in the same peaceful, green surroundings that we had made for the babies? Why not choose out and keep at least one or two of the children who, after their two or three happy years with us, would normally go on to the primary school?—The pioneers Agazzi, Franchetti, Montessori, Pizzigoni in Italy, Lucy Latter in England, 'new' schools and open-air schools everywhere all encouraged me to try.

"The curriculum and the whole method of the new schools might be summed up as education for initiative and responsibility. This means fresh air, both literally and figuratively, and one of the chief points about the new schools is that their curricula and their methods are brimful of air, light and liberty.' (G. Lombardo-Radice.)

"So I set myself to give my school two things: freedom to live and freedom to learn.

" 'There is no difference between education and instruction, between learning and character-training. Their underlying rhythm is just the same. A moral code is the same thing as a philosophy; a man's thought is his morality. Discipline implies thought, and is a subject of study like any other.' (G. L.-R.)

"So I started, with the approval of the Commune, and chose for my experiment five little girls and seven little boys. Montaigne says: 'Find out whether they are by nature noisy or quiet, bold or timid, gentle or cruel, open-hearted or reserved.' And this is what I put down for each of my chosen band:—

"*B. L.*—Reserved, shy.

"*G. M.*—Reserved. Inclined to notice and criticize other people's faults.

"*M. O.*—Extremely sensitive and shy, but wilful and at the same time good-natured.

"*V. A.*—Very reserved. Rather a dandy.

"('In any group of people, the best make a sound leaven which leavens the lump.' (G. L.-R.).)

"*B. V.*—Open-hearted, merry disposition, sensitive. He is very lively, but agile and graceful in his movements. Alert.

"*B. A.*—Reserved, painstaking, serious, alert.

"*F. F.*—Gentle disposition. Clear, adaptable mind.

"*L. G.*—Open-hearted, warm, alert.

"*P. E.*—Clear, attractive mind.

"*D. M.*—Talkative; at one moment cross and rude,



the next all eagerness, talking and laughing with her friends. Warm-hearted and anxious to correct the faults of her temperament.

"*P. D.*—Gentle and full of affection for his many brothers. Sometimes rather stupid, sometimes alive, warm, even daring.

"I was determined that these children should have a chance of getting to know and like one another as elementary school children never can in the ordinary way. 'They hardly know each other at all, because in school they are never able to talk, never free to be together'; while all the time 'the immense value of schoolboy friendships is undeniable.'

"And again: 'Being at school together over a long period makes an inward bond between people for life.' (G. L.-R.)

"I was always finding new sources of encouragement and inspiration. For instance:—

"'Cultivate every impulse in the child which makes for humanity and strength.' (Stein.)

"'I have tried to fill their hearts with frankness and simplicity.' (Montaigne.)

"'Puisque la philosophie est celle qui nous instruit à vivre et que l'enfance y a sa leçon comme les autres ages, pourquoi ne la communique l'on? La philosophie a des discours pour la naissance des hommes, comme pour la décrépitude.' (Montaigne.)

\* \* \* \* \*

"'Whatever their future careers may be, children

should first of all be made into worth-while, living human beings.' (G.L.-R.)

"So many great writers have said things which seem to describe my ideal school, I wish I could have their words inscribed all round me on my walls; just as, in my dreams, I have often wanted to make a lovely, gay schoolroom decorated quite simply, after the manner of Paulo Ucello, who delighted to paint trees and fields on the walls of his cottage, 'with birds and birds and still more birds, which the good man was for ever watching but could never hope to possess. He painted them on the ground, swimming on the water or among flowers and fruit.'

"I think the Franciscan friar who wrote like that about Ucello must himself have been very like a child. As he says of Ucello: 'To you, the poetry of things comes very, very close. If we would see them with your eyes, know you whither we must travel? Almost as far as Dante himself, because for us the long journey is a return, back to our childhood.'

"And then I have tried to follow the poet who said: 'Watch and listen on every side. Do not be afraid to be yourselves, just unspoilt children; because grown-up people lose the habit of watching and listening.' . . . 'Those who find romance all round them and in things commonly despised are the people who really feel it, and not those who, when they cannot see it near them, make huge efforts searching for it elsewhere.'

"The children and I send you our diaries for

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the past five years, and we dare to hope that you will like them. . . . RINA NIGRISOLI, Portomaggiore, May 15, 1924."

And there on my office table was a fat bundle of exercise books, coming from twelve children who were certainly, without knowing it, twelve little apostles of the School Reform. Without doubt, it was they, with their devoted leader, who had initiated it at Portomaggiore long before it became law. The bundle lay there like a basket of flowers inserted by some miracle into the mountain of official stuff waiting to be dealt with, and I let it stay there, untouched, for several days to comfort me.

Inside the neat wrappings I found, when I opened it, as well as the exercise books, a number of photographs of the garden school and my small, unknown friends, and it was a great pleasure to me to show them to all the odd visitors, well-meaning or not, who pretended to doubt the 'feasibility' of the Reform. I said to them: "Look here, one part of the Reform has already been found feasible in this tiny school quite unknown to me until a few days ago. What better justification for my optimism? What more effective answer to your doubts?"

To another I would say: "I want you to look at my model, the activity school in a nutshell. It is true that its success is due to rather special circumstances, in that it has very few children and a suggestive setting. But *something* of the same kind could be done in any school, however unpromising. Please understand:

'my.' Again and again it comes: 'Our house,' 'one of our chickens.'

"Listen, this is the best of all: 'The starlings and blackbirds have come already,' writes a little girl in the lowest class. And the teacher writes in the margin: 'Neither I nor the children knew at that time that blackbirds or starlings ever stay here. This has taught me to watch more closely and really notice the animal and plant life round about.' There is an honest school for you! Teacher and children learn together by exploring their world hand in hand, and the children put down in their journals things which show up her mistakes and her credulity as well as their own."

Such has been my answer to the unbelieving, and I was always able to illustrate my argument from my dear, ingenuous diaries, which I kept on the table beside me as a shield of defence.

But, later, I had to put them aside, being overwhelmed with administrative detail. The only times when I could ever take them out and look at them were when, on my holidays, I buried myself in the country with my books.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now that I have pored over the children's diaries so often, I feel that I can easily reconstruct the life they represent. Year in, year out, I think I understand the daily round. So here is a detailed description of the school's progress:

1919-20: The whole of the first few months at

school were spent in gardening, going for walks and collecting things of interest in garden and field. In the spring there were butterflies to study and caterpillars and chrysalises to watch. There were no books used, except, very tentatively, Formiggini-Santamaria's *First Reading Lessons*.<sup>1</sup> Then on the 19th of April we read that "the butterfly book has arrived." (I believe, to begin with, the poor teacher was not very well informed about the habits of insects and was finding herself embarrassed by some of the children's questions. Already she felt she needed expert advice.)

Now they can hunt and study to their hearts' content in garden, field—and book. The teacher writes: "We have a working knowledge of all the butterflies of this district, with their caterpillars, cocoons and chrysalises. All the children, big and little, love collecting them. They keep coming in triumphant, bursting with excitement, bringing me grubs in the hollows of their hands—nasty, dirty things they are sometimes, too!"

Each new discovery is duly recorded: "The butterflies we found to-day are called . . ." absurd, hard names like 'spilosama' and 'ematurga.' (You can hear the children laughing . . .)

No prunes and prisms for these six- and seven-year-olds! They have the garden at their disposal and they really learn about the butterflies, as well as just looking at them. They read from the book of life before ever they see a printed page.

<sup>1</sup> *Prima Lettura*, 3rd edition, Rome, 1919.

I am not showing you an official report but accounts written by the children themselves describing the whole of their life at school, for five years. If I had tried to work out Gentile's ideas in detail with these little notes as a guide, I should have arrived at exactly the conclusions with which you are familiar in my work. So you see, I do meet the teachers on their own ground, not try to force my theories on them. And who knows how many more schools there are like this one?"

There are those who say with smug satisfaction: "But of course this stuff has been specially prepared for your benefit." I read them a few pages and then I ask: "Can you doubt that these diaries are not got up for the occasion? The entries are not even made regularly every day, and they vary from a line to a page, according to the children's interest in the different happenings. Look at them: bare, matter of fact statements of things seen, straightforward, unadorned, genuine 'news in brief.' Read this (a little boy is writing of a friend's loss): 'June 12: Fernanda's Daddy is dead. We have gathered a box full of greenery and flowers for him.' That is all. Does it look as if it had been tampered with for exhibition purposes?"

"Twelve elementary school children are living together with the babies in the nursery school. But if you look at the first-year diaries you will find no mention of the nursery children. In the second year they are just referred to, and so, by degrees, are talked of more each year. You see what has happened? The reason is not far to seek. At first the seniors feel no

difference in their ages, but gradually they begin to realize that they are the 'big ones' as compared with the 'babies,' who really belong to the nursery. They develop a special interest in them, as of elder brothers and sisters, and naturally proceed to discuss them in their journals. No one could have forged that. It is a genuine record of child life, as anyone with a family or a school will recognize at once."

Every day I dipped into my bundle and every day I discovered something new to impress my visitors, both friendly and unfriendly:—

"Isn't there a 'homely feel' about this school? Read this: . . . you notice that the teacher is never referred to as such, only as 'Signorina Rina,' and the other mistresses are called 'Signorina Ida' and 'Signorina Irma.' In the same way they say 'the downstairs room' for 'the class-room,' we came 'home again' for 'back into school,' and 'Signorina Ida's children' for 'the infants' or 'juniors' or whatever it might be. Again, if a note of explanation had not been provided, I should have seen no difference between children and school servants. I am told that 'Lidia has done something or other, and Fernanda has said such and such,' and there is nothing to show that Lidia is the maid and Fernanda the little girl. It is clear that Lidia enters into the life of the place, because it is a home like any other country house and garden.

"And then look here—and here . . . everywhere they put 'we' and 'our,' much more often than 'I' or

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Even better than grub-hunting is the work they do for Soffritti, the gardener, weeding, sowing, digging: "We have finished our bank and Soffritti has sown it with grass seed."

On wet days or very hot summer ones, they draw, build, paste, cut out or model in clay; and long before they can read they learn poetry: "The last few days we have been acting the most lovely plays in the summer-house. We put branches of leaves in our hair and belts."

At the end of the first year, and not till then, a story book appears—just one copy to go round, so that they have to read aloud from it in turn. The little ones come and listen, as in the family circle, and of course the teacher joins in. (Actually, I have no doubt she does most of the reading.)

As to writing, there is no hurry about that either. All year the children have only produced at most fifty pages each of eight lines—that is, of big letters—and that only after first carefully talking over what they were going to write.

\* \* \* \* \*

1920-21: The children are getting bigger, and of course, when you 'grow up,' it is annoying still to be treated like babies in the nursery school. So the teacher, who understands these things, promotes them to be 'helpers.' There is plenty to do, and she lets them run errands for her. The diaries are full of the new duties:—



*Day's Work at Portomaggiore Garden School* 139

*October 22:* "We bought four beautiful aluminium mustard pots."

*November 6:* "This morning Giorgio, Vittore and Ario went to the market to buy an iron ball, but they came back empty-handed."

*November 8:* "We bought four lovely wooden trays for handing round bread and jam." (In the winter they have bread and jam for lunch.)

"What?" protest the timid, "Do you mean to say the children are sent out during school hours to do the shopping? Scandalous!"

On the contrary, it is an excellent idea. To begin with, 'school hours' is the wrong expression; this is a question of family life. And secondly, when children grow up they have to be treated as fellow-workers, not pupils in a school. They are the mothers'-helps and nursemaids. Naturally, there is no *need* to send them running errands; it is done on purely educational grounds, because a child who goes out 'to do the shopping' feels at once six inches taller. Imagine—doing things to help, choosing, with an eye to the needs and wishes of the others, perhaps meeting an acquaintance and being able to say proudly: "These are things I have been buying for the school," coming back all impatient to undo the parcels and show the treasures to admiring eyes—what object lesson could be more fruitful of healthy excitement?

Here are accounts of further expeditions:—

*December 20:* "Fernanda and I went to the piazza to buy twenty large exercise books."

*May 2:* "This morning Ario, Georgio and Vittore went to the blacksmith's to have the football blown up."

And some indoor jobs:—

*December 20:* "We brought the blackboards down from the attic. We brought two of our four-wheeled trucks down from the attic."

*February 26:* "To-day we went up to the attic to choose some of the things put away there."

The attic is a joy. It holds a mass of useless things which lie waiting for the children to come and make them necessary and valuable. Supposing the servant-girl went to tidy the place up: what would be the point? What would she do with the rubbish? This is a child's place, not a servant's.

Among the many interruptions to school work caused by expeditions indoors and outdoors, we must not forget the gardening. This is where Bernagozzi and Soffritti, the two gardeners, come in: "Hi! little 'uns! Come and put in some seeds!"—and who can hold them? Why *should* anyone hold them?

*February 21:* "Bernagozzi and Soffritti are waiting in the orchard for the boys to help plant the little trees which have come from Padua." So writes Fernanda in her private journal. With this and other remarks, it is she who gives the most vivid picture of this side of school life:—

*March 14:* "To-day the children have begun the star."

The star? Here the teacher has to help me out:

it appears that it is a flower-bed shaped like a star. It must have involved several processes: first a design, then measuring out the ground, digging and hoeing, making a little protective edging all round, choosing seeds, with due regard to the final colour-scheme—helped out with much discussion and constant rough sketches on the blackboard with crayons. The tutor and originator is Soffritti. Think of all the interests, all the *lessons* involved in the preparation of this star flower-bed! Surely there can be no harm done if, for a time, they go to school—under Bernagozzi and Soffritti.

*March 14:* (Raking the earth free of stones.) "On Saturday my Grandfather sowed his hemp. I collected lots and lots of little stones, and threw them to frighten away the hens and birds who tried to eat the hemp seeds." This is Elvezia, defending her grandfather's work. Clearly it is her right, and she is allowed to stay away from school for the business—as they say at Portomaggiore.<sup>1</sup>

The children take part in all the light agricultural work, as we see from their own accounts:—

*March 1:* "Yesterday morning we tied up the wistaria near the summer-house." (Elvezia.)

Sometimes they make botanical experiments:—

*April 16:* "Yesterday we sowed corn in earthenware bowls."<sup>2</sup> (Fernanda.)

<sup>1</sup> "Business" means work, any occupation, however brief.

<sup>2</sup> Corn should be sown on sand, in bowls: the children can then follow the growth of the seeds, watching them burst and germinate.

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There are references to thinning out the beds prepared by the boys:—

*May 2:* "The little parsley plants are growing quite big and we have divided and transplanted them all round the bed."

\* \* \* \* \*

In this part of the "day's work" I shall include games. Here are some for getting warm in winter-time:—

*November 12:* "Cold and foggy. This afternoon we played wild chariot-races."

*November 19:* "Giorgio, Ario, Bellini and Belletti took the four Signorine (the teachers) for rides in the trucks, in turns. Marta, Andreina and I looked at the Pinocchio book."

*December 13:* "The calicanthus are in flower.<sup>1</sup> Luigi has come back to school. To-day we jumped and kicked and brayed, playing 'donkeys.'" (This is a home-made game, invented by themselves.)

*March 1:* "Yesterday, more tambourines arrived from Milan."

*March 2:* "Signorina Rina has given out the new tambourines for us to play on."

As the seasons change, so do the games:—

*June 3:* "To-day we went for a walk. The babies

<sup>1</sup> There are flowers for every month of the year, and in these diaries the records of plants flowering take the place of dates. Each page begins either with some meteorological note, as in those we have already studied, or with the nature-notes for the day.

took off their shoes and socks to walk on the just-been-cut grass (*sic*).” (Fernanda.)

Indoor games for wet days are recorded equally. Here are some examples of games full of the most rich and varied “lessons”:—

*November 13*: “We saw a lovely meccano building which Signorina Irma brought to school.”

*November 15*: “The lovely building has been given to us. And we have bought three boxes of meccano from a little boy called Ricci, set 0, set 0A and set 1A.”

*November 16*: “List of the parts in the three boxes: No. 3, straight pieces with holes; No. 2, cranks, levers,” etc.

There follows a long list—admirable, spontaneous word practice!—“pulleys, drum-wheels, cross-pieces, supports, pincers, keys, vices, bolts, hooks,” etc.

*March 2*: “Signorina Rina has got the stencil papers ready. The children have been saying for ages: ‘Will you get the stencil things ready, Signorina?’ Now, at last, she has got them ready.”

That is the point: the teacher never prescribes a particular game, she says instead: “We might do . . .” or “It could be done like this, or like that. . . .” Then she waits till the children demand the thing of their own accord, when she knows she can count on their enterprise.

*March 21*: “To-day Signorina let us stencil.”

The school subjects nearest to play are singing and drawing.

Singing is done more during the winter, indoors; drawing, in spring, outside.

*October 20*: "We tried a sonatina, with the piano."

And it is soon apparent that the infection of school songs is caught in the street:—

*January 5*: "Yesterday," says Marta, "I was at my Granny's and, while I was standing at the window, I heard someone singing 'Jump, little girl.' I said: 'Who's singing?' It was some children from the Borgo Madonna, and they sang it beautifully and lightly."

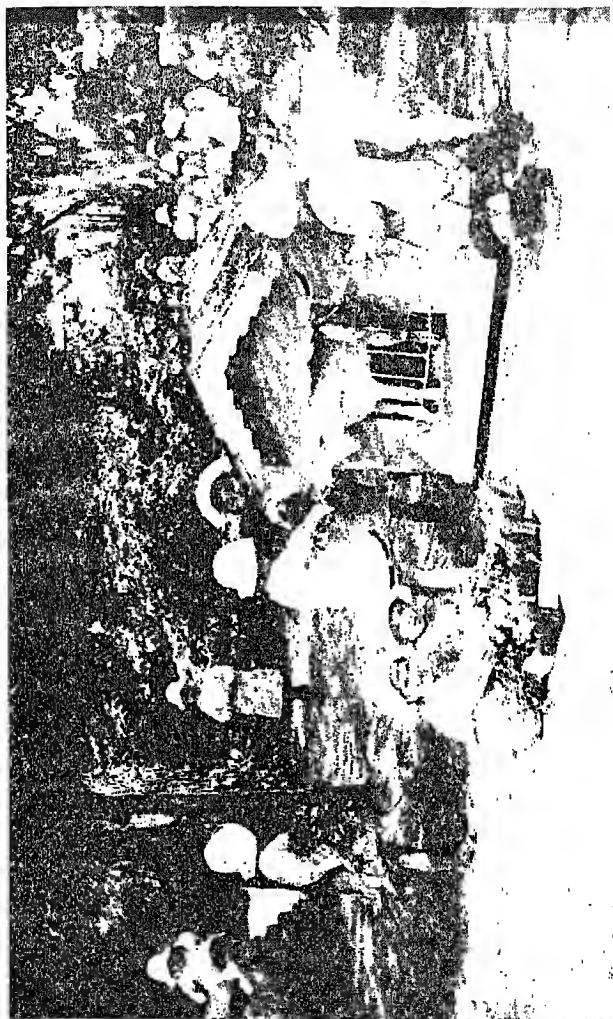
Then:—

*February 12*: "The violet buds are showing. Yesterday we drew them."

*March 2*: "Yesterday, while my friends were playing games, I had a lovely time drawing robins and goldfinches on the veranda," etc.

*April 11*: "Yesterday morning we went into the orchard with Signorina to pick some pear blossom to draw in our March notebooks." (Gino.)

But it must not be thought that, in this, the second year of school, there are no real lessons, with all the pride and joy of learning they bring. So genuine is the interest that the children often copy out into their diaries poems and scraps which have taken their fancy. Here, for example, in this extract from Elvezia's book, the influence of the poet Pascoli is obvious:—



THE GOATS AT HOME





*February 14:* "The beautiful sun has come back. The garden looks golden, the lane is golden, the orchard is golden. Torp (the dog) is sitting on the veranda enjoying the lovely sun."<sup>1</sup>

There is a note by the teacher in one of the children's books,<sup>2</sup> which gives some idea of how she set about getting spontaneous composition from them:—

"We began by discussing together the event of the day which seemed to us most worthy of mention. Then first one and then another began practising his power of expression *orally*, while the others contributed bits. Then they wrote it all down by themselves."

*1921-22:* As the years pass at the Portomaggiore garden school, lessons become not less living but more serious. During the first two years, 1919-21, it was still a kindergarten. The children learnt to keep their eyes open and to play, and everything was done through play. There were 'centres of interest,' as the children's diaries show, and as I have tried to explain in the foregoing pages; but every activity was really a game. Now, play gives way to work. The records show clearly what is happening:—

*Contrasts.*—(Recreation) "The babies are playing games. We children are sitting on the veranda. We have just finished putting on the little ones' outdoor clothes."

<sup>1</sup> Pure Pascoli: "The baby sleeps"—". . . the golden boughs, the golden trees, the golden forests . . ."

<sup>2</sup> Elvezia wrote in her book on February 28, 1921: "Tomorrow we are going to begin writing our diaries alone."

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(Work) "In reading, in the hall, we saw a picture of a person's throat. Yesterday there was one of a skull."

The distinction between work and play is, after all, a sound one, which should help the children in after-life.

*November 30:* "To-day, for the first time, Signorina gave us home-work."

For the first two years there was no home-work at all. The family-life at school gave everyone more than enough to think about. All branches of work were included in studying the surroundings, talking and learning to talk properly, and keeping records. In the third year home-work (which is usually given far too soon and is badly done as a result) takes its place as a longed-for distinction, attained after great striving. It is an honour due to the children's dignity, because they have grown up into *scholars*.

For example, during the first two years, the illustrations in books and the pictures on the class-room walls were a joy for the children to look at, but nothing else. Now they become the subject of careful description, for the perfecting of written language. Literary exercises are based upon the children's favourite fairy-tales:—

### *The Picture of the Three Dwarfs*

*January 25:* "I love the picture of the three dwarfs. In the background there are fir-trees. There is a little

tiny house with the roof all covered with snow. It is the house belonging to the three little dwarfs. At the window you can see the three pretty little faces of the three dwarfs. In front a little girl is walking over the snow. She is dressed in a thin, summer frock, and she has beautiful golden hair down to her waist. You can see her little, bare, pink legs and her poor feet, bleeding a bit. On her arm she has a basket, and she is holding her hands up to her mouth, to warm them with her breath."

It is clear how hard the child has worked to give an exact description, at the same time avoiding clumsy language. The result is not unworthy of his first, visual impression. The words are very adequate to the writer's plastic sense: background and foreground are distinct, the different parts of the picture are in proportion, the colours, and the attitudes of the people carefully described. The child is not merely repeating the story (for of what use would that be to anyone?); he is giving an account of the picture, picking out the details and defining them in words for the benefit of himself and anyone else who might look at it.

Let me quote another example, this time from the diaries. These are beginning to record all manner of serious and worth-while discussions. An instinct for research is becoming apparent, as the writers get used to collecting their material and selecting what is important from it, investigating and weighing their experiences—and sometimes finding them too slight or superficial for inclusion. The word "think" occurs

frequently, not as a manner of speaking only, but in the sense of serious thought:

*March 8:* Elvezia's diary opens thus:—"This morning I am thinking."

*March 24:* (Elvezia again):—"This morning I have thought and thought and can think of nothing to write. It is a lovely day, but my brain is in a muddle."

*March 29:* "I can hear Ottorina saying: 'What shall I do now?' and now I can see her beginning to write. She is lucky, she has done her thinking, but I haven't begun yet."

Note by the teacher:—"This shows how hard they find it to think of a suitable subject. Their attention wanders, and their powers of expression are limited by the smallness of their vocabularies. Do you think they are wasting time?"

My answer is: No indeed. They are finding themselves. The spontaneous, disconnected remarks of the first years have given them the data for their problem, which is to co-ordinate, select and explain. 'Vocabulary' should never come before active comprehension. Only in so far as it is based on understanding will it really grow and each enrich the other. The lungs take in air because the heart is beating, but the heart only beats because the lungs are there to put oxygen into the blood. So reflection, which is conscious thought, active and directed, affects language learning, and is in turn affected by it, in a continuous circle.

The child who has become a scholar keeps a watch

on his own thinking and talking. This is what our Fernanda is able to say at the end of 1922:—

"I shall never write my diary in the afternoon again. The morning is better. Now I feel all sleepy and my thoughts come out clumsy and awkward."

Not that they are in the habit of striking a solemn attitude for the purpose of 'thinking.' You shall judge of the gravity of their thoughts from the following varied quotations from Andreina:

*February 14:* "This morning, when my Grandfather was cutting my hair, I heard someone laughing and laughing. It was my little sister, holding on to the bed-rail with her little hands. She was laughing away with my Mummy, who was watching to see that she didn't fall."

*February 20:* "Yesterday morning my Mummy came in with her shopping basket. Inside there were little shoes for my baby sister. They were bright yellow. My little sister laughed and stretched out her little hand and said: 'Shoes, shoes! Put, put!'"

*February 24:* "In the paper that we take, there is the silly story of poor Michele who ate the honey. In the middle and at the end it says: 'Miche-le-le, Miche-le-le aveva un cagnoli-no-no.' How we laughed!"

*March 18:* "This morning my Mummy was dressing my baby sister, and my Mummy said to her: 'Up arms!' to put her binder on. And she put up her little arms, and she looked lovely like that."

*March 30:* "My Mummy laughed such a lot this morning, because I said the poem about the moon.

I was saying it under my breath, and she asked me: 'Whatever are you saying?' and I said: 'The poem about the moon,' but of course she could only hear me whispering."

*March 31*: "This morning, I was still half asleep, and my Mummy was singing a nonsense-song. It goes like this:

La bella Madonnina,  
Che si alza la mattina,  
Prende l'acqua benedetta  
Per lavarsi le mani e il viso  
Per volare in paradiso.<sup>1</sup>

Of such is the 'thinking' of children.

*1922-23*: In the fourth year of the experiment the diaries grow more complex. From descriptions, they become 'meditations.' Young as they are, the children are quickly influenced by their teacher's ideals of conduct in and out of school. Conscientious little students, they learn to know their own bad impulses, and they set about making themselves better by noticing and correcting their faults. It is odd to find in the diaries headings such as 'Anger, Scorn, Jealousy' and so on. It looks as if the whole year were given up to the contemplation of human errors.

There might be a danger of these children becoming prigs. But I hardly think so. Any child is quite capable of forming his own rules of conduct.

<sup>1</sup> "The pretty little Madonna, when she gets up in the morning, takes holy water to wash her hands and face and fly away into Paradise."

A people—an unspoilt race of peasants or shepherds—has its standards, expressed in legend and proverb, and is able to apply them, traditional as they are, to real life. The characters in Aesop's fables are, so to speak, mirrors of their author's moral experience, and in their conversation, their comments on events, typify the human beings he actually met with. The fable, in all its multitudinous national forms, is a time-honoured mine of wisdom, and the proverb, as a secular precept, is always reappearing in new shapes, as on the lips of Romain Rolland's immortal peasant, Cola Breugnon.

If a people's moral code is hallowed by tradition, it is none the less live at heart. In the same way a child's moral code takes the outward form which he learns from well-meaning adults, but inside it has a vigorous, if limited, life of its own, quite apart from its verbal expression.

So, when the teacher talks about the bad impulses which everybody feels and how they have to be curbed, a great many of the diaries echo her solemn words. (I do not mean that she preaches at them; she simply refers to any particular needs they may have, and far from being sententious she is all sympathy and understanding.) The children take what she says as a guide in their reflections on their problems, and they become so much engrossed that they get into the habit of watching for the mysterious, instinctive springs of human conduct. There is nothing self-righteous about their comments. They observe their feelings

with the same sympathetic interest they give to flowers and insects, and sometimes they produce little sketches which are remarkably true to life, for all their childishness. (I would draw attention, in passing, to the successful wording of these compositions.)

I will pass over the sections which are common to all the children, where they are obviously reproducing the teacher's advice, and quote some of the more personal passages:—

*An Example of Anger*

*February 4:* "Danilo, our school-friend, has a little brother of 4, called Livio. He is a very intelligent baby, with the eyes of a scamp, a real little monkey, always putting in his word. This morning they came to school together. Livio was in a bad temper and, to let off steam, he pushed Danilo into the ditch beside the road. The first time Danilo said nothing—and the second—and the *fourth*. Then he jumped up in a burst of anger and raised his hand and hit Livio twice over the head. That made Livio stop dead in the middle of the road! Danilo said: 'Come on; come along!' but he stood still. 'Oh, very well then!' said Danilo, and he went on by himself, turning round every now and then to look at Livio. And he saw that Livio was coming too, with little, short steps. They had both stopped being angry, and they both arrived quite happily at school."

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*Animal Jealousy*

*March 15:* "Vittore has told us that when his horse saw another horse being led into the stable she made angry movements, laid back her ears and stamped her hoof on the ground; and the dogs did the same.

"We can remember, last year, how jealous Torp and Gulu were when Colombo, a sheep-dog, came into the garden. He was young and merry and always wanting to play, and we used to pat him; but we daren't pat him when Gulu and Torp were there, because, when we did, they rushed at him and barked.

"And goats! You should see how jealous our little goat is of Signorina Ida! When we go for a walk she always wants to be beside her, and if she sees a little boy or girl with Signorina she begins to butt at once."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Children's Jealousy*

*March 22:* "I am going to write about jealousy. There is a family living near Vittore, where there are a grandfather, a mother and two children, one of 6 and the other about 2. The little one is very pretty and jolly. You should see how she comes trotting when she sees Vittore coming! But she is very jealous. One day the grandfather had the elder girl in his arms, kissing her and laughing and saying as a joke: 'This is my baby! This is my baby! I don't want you any more, any more!' The little one's face clouded over and she lifted her

hand in a threatening way and called her sister a rude name.

"The grandfather went on with his play, and the little girl couldn't bear it and began to cry miserably. So the grandfather had to put down the older child and take the baby into his arms and stroke her and kiss her. Then she began to smile, with the tears still on her cheeks."

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### *Spite*

*March 1, 1923* (Ario begins with the aphorism.)  
 "Everybody feels at some time or other the wish to do something spiteful. But it is wrong to give in to this impulse." (Then follows the illustration.)

"Just now the babies are playing marbles. The marbles are quite small, made out of pebbles, in different colours. Some of the babies have got their pockets simply bulging with them.

"This morning we were talking about doing spiteful things, and Bellini told us that almost every evening he goes to the iron bridge and plays marbles. Sometimes the others won't let him join in the game and he looks on, full of spite and irritation. The others get excited, looking at the lovely pattern of marbles, then—bang! somebody gives a kick and the lovely pattern is spoilt. Somebody laughs: 'Ha! ha! they don't want me, don't they?' "

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Another example:—The children had again been asked to comment on a case of spite, but the memory of the passages quoted above was too much for Elvezia's imagination and so she forgot to put in her 'reflections':—

*May 27:* "One day my little brother Coclite and I went to pick camomile in a little field nearby. Gina was with us; Gina is a friend of mine.

"We began picking, snap! snap! snap! In medicine, only the flowers are used, and so you have to pick them like this: you open your first and middle fingers, get the stalk in the 'V,' tight, give a little pull and the flower comes off in your hand, with hardly any stalk. While we were picking, I said the poems by Pascoli and Barbarini that Gina likes so much. And I sang the songs we sing at school. When we had finished, we went home happily, and spread the camomile to dry in the sun, in the yard. We all three went into my house and had tea.<sup>1</sup> My Mummy cut thin, thin slices of ham and new bread made that very morning early. When we had finished, we went into the yard to look at the camomile. Such a horrid surprise! The camomile was scattered everywhere. While we were looking, we heard a little boy of 4, called Alberto, calling from the road: 'I saw him—it was Valter.' Valter is Gina's brother. He is a shy little boy, but he loves playing tricks. We hadn't wanted to take him with us and so he took his revenge."

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<sup>1</sup> Not literally "tea," of course.

In the fourth year of the experiment, the teacher began to be attacked from every side by the problems of the ordinary elementary school. Up till then she had really done nothing but 'live with her children,' as if they were her own, talking, observing, playing with them. She had never given a thought to examinations, until people began to remind her of them and to condemn her experiment because it did not properly 'prepare' the children.

So she decided to put an end to her attempt at an activity school and conform as far as possible to other people's requirements. I think I should do wrong in substituting here my words for hers, and so I will reproduce without more ado the notes which accompany the diaries for this fourth year. They make in any case suggestive reading for young mothers and teachers:—

"All my pioneer energy had deserted me. A distressing combination of circumstances made it advisable to stop, and to stop quickly, before the parents should be forced to regret having sent me their children. Henceforward, *preparation for examinations*—introduction to letter-writing—short essays on given subjects.—How was it to be done, without at the same time giving up the old, natural ways?

"Well, *letter-writing*: We began as occasion arose, and our first was sent to one of ourselves, Ario, who was ill. Each child wrote him a separate letter, in his own exercise book. Then we wrote one to the *Commissario Prefettizio*, Dr. Luigi Pisanò, to whose active interest

we owed so much; and by degrees, as and when events suggested, we produced a reasonable quota of letters.

"Then *essays*: We began with 'A Dream.' Some of the children told theirs to me, aloud. From the whole group we chose the one we liked best—in this case Elvezia's—and when we had expanded it and made some doubtful points clear, the result was very simple and attractive.

"So we went on, and we tried to treat each subject in as many different ways as possible. After 'A Dream,' we took 'Tears' and 'Fear.'

"I would say, the day before: 'To-morrow we are going to write about such and such a thing. Will anyone who likes think of some ideas, please?' And the next day contributions poured in. Then followed the 'critiques'—criticisms of each child's piece of work by himself, as compared with the others'. After assessing, classifying and summing up all the essays, we made a final choice, and then the successful author was called upon to develop his argument, stopping, if anyone put up his hand, to explain an obscure point to the questioner. Sometimes it was I who asked for an explanation, sometimes a wide-awake friend, and in this way the composition was amplified and made clear. It was as if the others had said: 'We, too, want to see what you saw, to enjoy your treat or feel what made you happy or sad.'

"So each production was brought out of its isolation and became part of a real setting, among natural things

and living people and voices. 'We don't want useless details,' 'You ought to say that quickly, shortly,' 'At that point you should show more excitement,' so the critics, the collaborators. . . .

"Each of us, teacher and children, brought his contribution, and when the strenuous work of discussion was over, one of us got up and read the finished product through to a keenly attentive audience. Thus the foundations of appreciation were laid. All the experiences of the children's lives, their discoveries and impressions, were rediscovered in common and took on a new and lasting dignity. I think the way of literature was pleasant for them.

"I thought of Giovanni Pascoli's words: 'He who can find poetry in the common things round him, in the ordinary sayings of every day, may rightly boast of having a feeling for poetry.'

"I think this kind of work is of value for the understanding of literature. Again and again I used to hear the children exclaim, as they looked up at me, bright-eyed, from their books: 'Oh, how beautifully written! How well said! You can almost see it. You can *hear* it.'

\* . \* \* \*

"During those troubled days there were moments when the enthusiasm of teaching again possessed me. It was when I saw them all sitting round me in a semicircle, joyfully engrossed in the work of analysis, polishing up their compositions to make them true as

well as beautifully written. When they had done a piece of language work, they would say: 'Let's choose which is the best, and then we'll all pull it into shape!' And I would listen and follow humbly where they, the unsophisticated, led. Little did they suspect how deeply I was moved!"

I want to quote one or two examples of this half-free essay-writing, afterwards elaborated in common. I have chosen the children's individual efforts, which afterwards formed the basis of the combined composition, because, although I would not wish to condemn corporate work, yet I am a little uncertain about it, for reasons which I have given in my book, *Athena Fanciulla*. Personally, I believe more in free, individual expression—the written conversation of children, however full of mistakes and short-comings in literary style. Indeed, I consider these childish errors to be not so much mistakes as characteristics of young minds; and I believe their 'correction' should not come directly, from the teacher to the particular composition, but indirectly, through the maturation of the child's intelligence by experience, reading, talking. It will probably come quite apart from the subject in hand, though very possibly under the teacher's guidance and through her suggestion.

For these reasons I do not consider that the most original contribution of the Portomaggiore school is so much *composition* as the *living experience* behind it. But it is interesting to see how the new spirit of

observation reacts on the traditional lesson, giving it a flavour of sincerity and offering it a genuine choice of real material. In spite of the polishing process, the pattern of true childish art is never lost.<sup>1</sup>

Here are some of Elvezia's essays:—

*Vittore's Unhappiness*

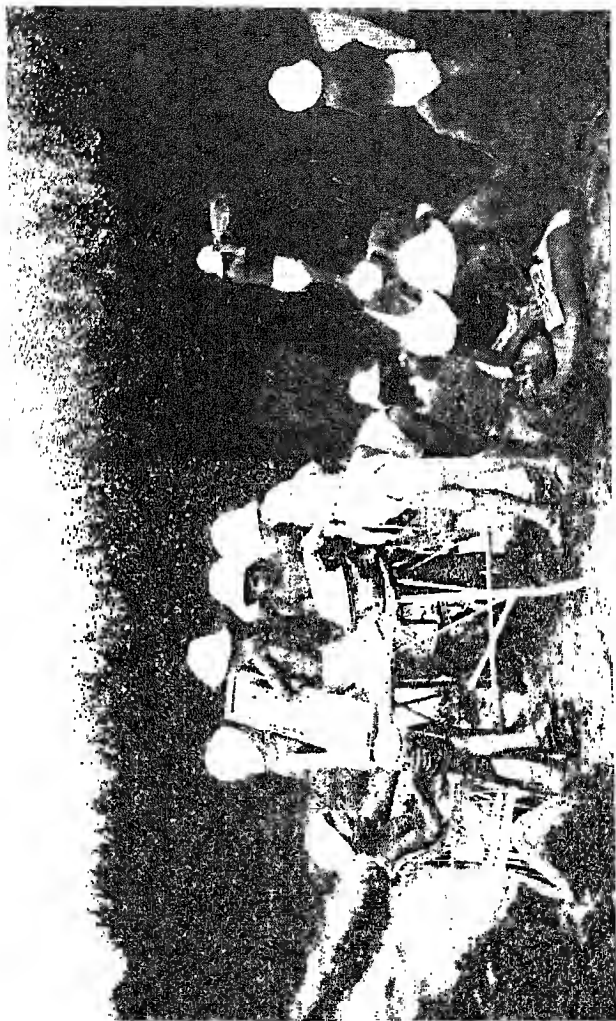
*January 25:* "Vittore used to have a fox-terrier puppy, white with black spots and a brownish face. He was intelligent and a very good ratter. He had a very fine scent. But, poor dear, he got ill.

"One day Vittore came in from play and saw the dog with one paw lifted off the ground. Vittore asked: 'Mummy, what's the matter with the dog?' 'Oh, he must have a thorn in his foot.'

"They tried rubbing him, but it was no good. It was the beginning of arthritis. His people decided to give him an injection of strychnine poison. One day, when Vittore was playing with his friends in the piazza, he saw his grandfather go past in his overcoat, with the puppy following. They were going to a boy who is a veterinary student to have the injection done. Poor little thing, he didn't know he was going to die. Vittore felt all his happiness go, but he went on playing all the same. But at the end of the game, Vittore went home, and he couldn't help crying. His

<sup>1</sup> The compositions are, possibly, just a little "cold." It is as if the young authors were continually on their guard.





FIELD WORK



aunts, who were working there, tried to say things to comfort him, but Vittore paid no attention. He was too miserable."

*Ario's Dream*

*February 22:* "Ario once read a story called 'The Old Men's Christmas.' There was a picture at the beginning, where you could see a big room, with five old men in different parts of it, looking very sad. It was Christmas Day and all the other old men had had invitations to go out except them.

"Last night Ario dreamt that he was at Ferrara. He was out for a walk with his auntie, and he saw in front of him a great building, and it was the workhouse. Ario saw his grandfather, leaning on a stick, and he was dressed like a workhouse man. And he saw his granny, too, down below, on the front-door steps, and she was dressed like a workhouse person, too. Then Ario woke up. He *was* relieved. He saw his granny asleep on his left and his grandfather on his right, and he felt he loved them and never wanted to see them in the workhouse."

\* \* \* \* \*

*One of Danilo's Stories*

(Danilo evokes his 'memories of childhood.')

"Danilo was 4 and his brother Virginio 5. Every afternoon they went out to see their Auntie Zaira, who lived near a level crossing. One afternoon, when they

came to the level crossing, the gates were shut. A goods train had stopped there. They waited and waited, but the train didn't go on. What do you think they did? They began to creep under the trucks. But at that moment, the train blew its whistle, and it began—'Sh-sh-shshshshsh——.' Danilo and Virginio came out the other side all of a tremble.

"Their auntie had been watching and she didn't smile at them as usual. She had to give them a beating. And for a month and more they never went in that direction. Danilo and Virginio were afraid their auntie would scold them."

\* \* \* \* \*

1923-24: At this stage, although the old, varied interests are still there, they begin to devour books, particularly historical and scientific books.

And now, after November 1923, the teacher is more at liberty to do as she pleases, because the Gentile syllabuses have justified her in almost every respect, and she is no longer tied by the old, rigid requirements.

The day's work in this last period of the experiment includes, besides all the usual activities of the earlier years, continual practice in *composition*, extended now to cover historical events—gracious, human incidents about our national heroes, like the stories of Garibaldi and the man with St. Anthony's fire, or Mazzini and the goldfinch in the prison of Savona. The children also begin to learn something of the history of literature; and they are taught to paraphrase and translate dia-

lectual poems and give accounts of suitable newspaper articles.

But I must resist the temptation of further elaboration. If I were once to embark on a full description, these more advanced literary 'projects' would be altogether too absorbing.

## CHAPTER VI

### NATURALISTS IN THE MAKING

WHAT is the place of butterflies in a garden school? Not, at least, in the rhyme:—

Little butterfly, white as white,  
Flies all day and flies all night . . .<sup>1</sup>

Those are not real butterflies, in the song. They have been made on purpose, 'for children,' by grown-up people who seem to have no sense of the poetry in nature. But at Portomaggiore the butterflies *are* real, like those of Fabre—they are the scientist's, not the schooly, childish rhymster's. They are alive, each with her own secret, in her own world, and that is a world which the superficial observer will never know, although the entomologist who has studied it makes poems about the marvellous changes which take place there and the wise, instinctive customs of the inhabitants.

Anyone who has read Fabre, the Homer of the insect world, knows that the writings of a scientist may well be great literature; and so thought the mistress of Portomaggiore. No entomologist herself, she nevertheless shared in the studies of her brother, a true author-scientist, followed his observations

<sup>1</sup> Farfallina bianca bianca  
Vola sempre e mai si stanca . . .

on insect life in the garden and did her best to appreciate and understand. She had the advantage of being all the time with her pupils, and if they saw through her eyes, she also saw through theirs. Walks and sitting out-of-doors meant for them not merely the passive enjoyment of sun and air, but constant voyages of discovery. The children would always be making fresh finds and asking about them, and the teacher would join in their researches and incite them to ever greater enterprise, without a thought that she was running the risk of being unable to answer all the resulting questions. She worked frankly hand in hand with them, and the children, in actual fact, were never shocked to find her ignorant, but rather were filled with admiration for her enthusiasm and constituted themselves her research assistants in observation and experiment.

The 'scientific spirit' grew and flourished during the five years from the first class to the fifth, and, side by side with it, the fire of poetry burnt high in the children's hearts. If we look at the diaries (in particular the spring entries, which are the most important for entomologists), we can watch the rhythm of the days advancing from year to year. At first it is surprising how casual the remarks are, without any apparent connection. But it is still more surprising to watch how, by degrees, the unrelated scraps take on a kind of order and the continued interest produces some sort of conscious system.

At first the Portomaggiore children are simply

'bug-hunters,' on the lines suggested by the pioneer of infant education, Lucy Latter. (Signorina Nigrisoli had studied her work in Alice Franchetti's translation.<sup>1</sup>) They collect nameless caterpillars and butterflies and are content to watch their ways.

1919-20: They begin on a "big, fat green caterpillar found by one of the children last year." It had made itself a cocoon:—

May 7, 1920: "Yesterday, the butterfly came out of the cocoon."

May 9: "Our butterfly has stayed on the little olive-tree. This morning there was another butterfly, just the same, with her."

It was the first time they had seen the miracle 'they write about in books.' I believe, if anyone were to inquire into the number of children in city schools who have actually seen a caterpillar make its cocoon and the butterfly come out, the result would be very strange!

May 9: "We have found a caterpillar."

May 10: "The caterpillar has half finished making a cocoon."

May 12: "We opened a cocoon made by a little, tiny caterpillar, and inside we found him already turned into an insect called a cochineal."

That was the first real experiment in entomology and the first stock-taking. As a result, curiosity is

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Latter: *School Gardening for Little Children*, London, Swan, Sonnenschein & Co., 1906. *Il Giardinaggio insegnato ai Bambini*. Rome, Albrighi e Segati, 1908.



sharpened and research becomes more persistent. They want to see more and more new phenomena.

May 24: "Giorgio found a little, wee caterpillar on a bean leaf. To-day it has turned into a moth with an orange body."

Discoveries pour in from all sides. One day Danilo even found some "little caterpillar eggs" inside one of his sandals!

The teacher turns each chance find to account, providing plenty of suitable glass cases and jars and tumblers so that the children can watch every phase of insect life. And, in order to learn herself and so be in a position to identify caterpillars and butterflies, she buys two books, easy enough for the children to consult themselves as well: *The Butterfly Book*,<sup>1</sup> by S. Mantero, with 25 coloured plates, showing 326 separate insects, and 21 engravings, published by A. Donath of Genoa; and *Butterflies*,<sup>2</sup> by A. Senna, a dictionary of 24 double-page coloured lithographs, giving examples of 349 butterflies, caterpillars and chrysalises, published by Hoepli, of Milan.

May 28: For the first time, the children watch a butterfly lay her eggs. They have already identified her in Mantero's book, and one child notes in his diary:—

"The 'falera bucefala'<sup>3</sup> has laid some littè, pale

<sup>1</sup> *Il Libro delle Farfalle.*

<sup>2</sup> "Le Farfalle."

<sup>3</sup> I have not attempted to translate the butterflies' names, although many of them have, of course, English equivalents.—M. C. G.

green eggs on the side of the glass jar where we put her."

*June 2*: "Gino has found a beautiful new butterfly—a 'villereccia.'"

*June 7*: "The eggs of the 'falera bucefala' have hatched and little, tiny caterpillars have come out."

Every new caterpillar presents a new problem and in many cases is difficult to recognize. The children have heated discussions about the kind of butterfly which will come out of the cocoon—a question which, happily, answers itself.

*June 9*: "The caterpillar which Lidia found has turned into a 'perdilegno' butterfly."

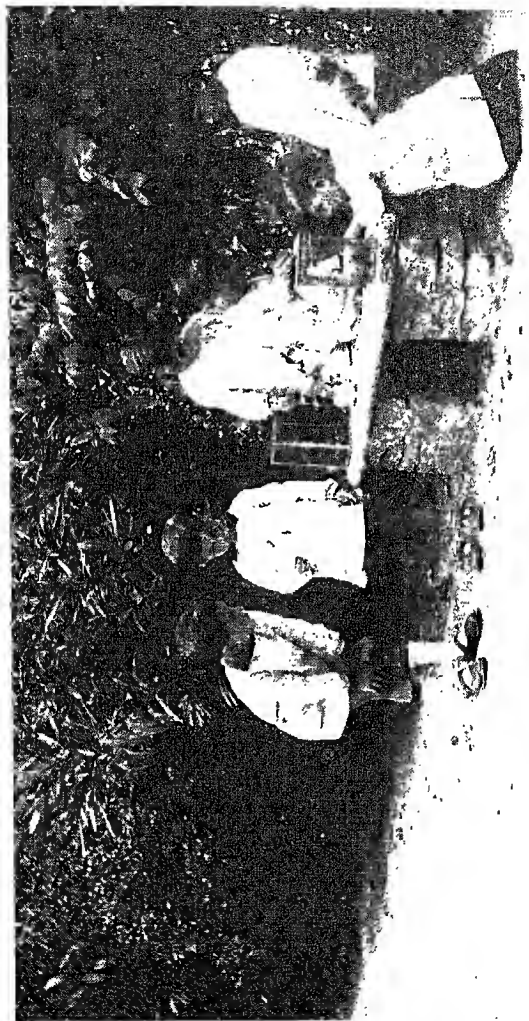
By the end of the year nearly all the caterpillars in the garden can be easily recognized at a glance.

*July 7*: "To-day, Scolastica and Tripola found two caterpillars of 'saturnia' butterflies."

*July 9*: "Tripola's two caterpillars have made their cocoons already. We have found four others of the same kind."

*July 17*: "There is a 'misuratore' caterpillar on the acacia. . . ."

To sum up: in the first class, the children's collecting interests are skilfully exploited. They search, collect and classify, and, all the time, they *talk* about what they are doing, constantly perfecting their language in conversation with the teacher. They *write* their little essays, to crown their researches and discoveries; and they have abundant first-hand material for *drawing and painting*.



FEEDING THE CATERPILLARS



1920-21: Spring again, and the return of the butterflies. Elvezia sees the first on March 4th. The 'saturnias,' asleep inside their cocoons, wake and salute the sun. Fernanda writes:—

April 27: "Two lovely 'saturnia' butterflies are sitting on the balcony rail. They have just come out of their chrysalises, one yesterday and one to-day. There are still four chrysalises in the jar. I hope the butterflies, which are still asleep, will soon come out of their cocoons."

And the next day:—

"Just beside us, in the glass jar, there is a 'saturnia' butterfly getting ready to fly away. Her wings are vibrating<sup>1</sup> and her little, velvety head is just peeping over the edge of the jar."

Fernanda's imagination is bound up with her 'saturnia.' She follows her, after she has flown away, and personifies her:—

"Yesterday evening, four 'saturnia' butterflies came into the hall. *Perhaps they are our three, come back with a friend.*"<sup>2</sup>

The little girl obviously feels it all very strongly. She is distressed that the boys have not seen what

<sup>1</sup> The child had written "trembling," but the teacher suggested "vibrating." A note by her against this entry says: "After an exact piece of observation, everything depends on an exact description. I like to be able, from time to time, to suggest the precise word—noun, adjective or verb—for the things and qualities and actions which the children's unsophisticated eyes take in."

<sup>2</sup> I make no comment, beyond my italics.

she has seen, and she writes in her diary for May:—

May 11: "Yesterday, for the first time (i.e. 'at last') the boys saw a 'saturnia' come out of her chrysalis! It was the sixth we have had."

New problems arise in connection with the children's care of their little vivarium:—

May 25: "This morning three little, furry caterpillars came out of their eggs. *We don't know what to give them to eat.*"

Of course, as they did not know whose eggs these were, they could not consult their books and find what leaves were suited to the caterpillars. What a pity! The caterpillars must die. . . . And yet I think the traditional school, which is spared such disappointments, is no happier for that.

1921-22: The third spring of the Portomaggiore teaching experiment—and the work is getting more ambitious. The children, now fairly initiated, are capable of producing serious original studies in natural history.

May 3, 1922: Elvezia writes: "We have to make a note in our books of *the flowers and butterflies which come in April.*"

They are ready to co-ordinate the fragmentary knowledge acquired during the previous years. The diary entries are full of matter and often refer to finished experiments.

May 23: "On March 24 (two whole months ago)

we found a 'saturnia minore.' 'The 'saturnia' always lays her eggs on a green twig. We put the twig in a glass jar and the caterpillars were born. They were like pin-points and black as coal. They lived on wild plum-tree leaves. This morning we saw a wonderful thing: the biggest caterpillar has changed colour. It isn't jet black any more, but a beautiful green with black stripes and two yellow spots." (Elvezia.)<sup>1</sup>

*June 3:* "Yesterday we had three caterpillars of the 'occhio di pavone' butterfly in a little glass case. They were black and velvety, covered with spots and delicate black hairs. I wonder why they wouldn't eat the nettle leaf we put for them?

"This morning we looked for them, but instead of caterpillars there were three lovely chrysalises hanging from the sides of the case, two pea green and the other olive green."

*June 12:* "The 'occhio di pavone' butterflies have come out of their three chrysalises already. This morning they were still all wet. Two were hanging on to the sides of the case; the other was lying upside down at the bottom, and we helped her to turn over. At this moment two of the butterflies' wings are vibrating, ready for their first flight." (Elvezia.)

It is curious that, while the little girls like watching the insects in the 'laboratory' and writing up their notes, the boys prefer exploring and giving oral, rather

<sup>1</sup> It is clear that the "butterfly books" have not only taught the children to know the different insects, but are helping them to give clear and exact descriptions.

than written, accounts. They are nearly always the discoverers, the girls the recorders:—

“This morning Giorgio brought a male ‘saturnia minore’ to school. The male is smaller than the female, but it has brighter colouring.” (Elvezia.)

*May 19:* I think you can tell from this entry of Elvezia’s how vivid Vittore’s original description must have been:—

“After Vittore had done some reading, he began to walk up and down beside the hedge. Suddenly, on top of a thin post, he saw an empty chrysalis, and beside it an ‘aporia’ butterfly. He stretched out his hand to touch her and saw that she did not move. She was all wet, and only just out of the chrysalis. He took her very gently and put her on a rose, and all of a sudden she put out her tongue to suck. After a little, the butterfly got dry. You could see the black veins on her white wings.”

\* \* \* \* \*

For the study of bird life during the later years of the experiment, the children used the following ‘reference books’ at school: Vallon, *The Book of Birds*,<sup>1</sup> published by Donath of Genoa, and Bacchi della Lega, *Hunting Habits and Customs of Woodland Birds*,<sup>2</sup> published by Lapi, Città di Castello, 1910.

This last was a particular favourite of Ferdinando Martini and Giovanni Pascoli, and it is admirably

<sup>1</sup> *Il Libro degli Uccelli.*

<sup>2</sup> *Caccie e Costumi degli Uccelli Silvani.*



adapted, because of its descriptions, as a complement to field work. In the fifth-form exercise books you will find quotations from it, in the children's 'science essays'—the most interesting of all their language work.

I should like to give some examples of these essays, the results of the children's field work, to demonstrate the personal interest taken by the writers in their subjects:—

1923-24: *January 15*:

*The Black-Cap*

"The black-cap is very tame. He loves people and flower-beds and kitchen gardens and clumps of trees and thick hedges. We know, because a long time ago a black-cap built a nest among the rambler roses on the summer-house in our school garden. Sad to say, we have taken it down now. She was very fond of her babies and never left them; but although she never deserted them, she used to let us hold them in our hands. You can't breed black-caps in cages.

"The black-cap sings beautifully. The best times to hear him, as Alberto Bacchi della Lega says, are when the sun rises and again when the daylight dies."

*January 13*:

*The Blackbird*

"The blackbird belongs (*sic*) to the birds in our garden. It builds in hedges and fir-trees outside,

its nest is all rough, made of leaves and twigs stuck together with mud; inside it is made of the same things, but more smoothly.

"The female bird lays five or six eggs in the nest, blue-green, with little brownish spots. She sits on the eggs very thoughtfully (*sic*). In the daytime the blackbirds are very quiet, so that the females shan't be disturbed. Then, later on, they sing this little verse (*sic*): 'chee-ock . . . chee-ock . . . chee-ock . . .' wagging their tails and wings. They sing in the morning at sunrise, and in the evening at sunset."

*February 14:*

### *The Starling*

"The starlings come to live in our country, all round us. The roof of our school is full of nests. The starling is black, with a black beak and black claws. In the autumn his beak is yellow and in spring it is black. Starlings don't bother much about their nests. They make them of straw and hay and bits of root, with hardly any hole in the middle. Starlings lay twice a year, and their eggs are sea green, five or six of them. They are very fond of their babies. Their song is a short, sad, whistling sound. Every morning, as soon as I open the school gate, I look up and see the owl sitting on the roof-gable with all the starlings flying round, calling."

*The Wren*

"While we were having dinner, Luigi Belletti (one of the children) came up with his hands spread over one another and said: 'Signorina, I've got something lovely!' He opened his hands and we saw a beautiful little bird's head. We all thought he had a sweet little black beak. On his head he had a stripe of beautiful yellow feathers, with pale lemon-yellow stripes on each side and then black stripes. The rest was olive green. We began at once to look him up in the book, and found that he was a wren.

"The wren builds his nest in hilly places, at the end of a fir or pine branch. His nest is made of very soft, fine things, with a little hole on one side for a door. The eggs are pink and white and as small as peas. The nest and the eggs are both perfectly sweet."

## CHAPTER VII

### THE MISTRESS OF PORTOMAGGIORE

AT the Portomaggiore school the teacher is a person of flesh and blood. Perhaps some who are superstitious about 'freedom' for children will say that there is too much of her—and undoubtedly her personal influence is very marked. Human character cannot, by its nature, be kept in a water-tight compartment, and that being so it seems to me an odd notion to banish the teacher out of respect for the liberties of the taught. Naturally, a schoolmistress who tried to turn out children on her own pattern would be doing them a grave wrong; but there is always the opposite mistake, no less serious for being well-meant, of maintaining a perfectly colourless attitude to all the children's activities, and so depriving their growing minds of the guiding influence they need.

Either a teacher believes in herself or she does not. If she is sincere about her ideals, and yet wants to avoid prejudicing her pupils, she will have to hide away her most characteristic thoughts and keep secret everything which is real and valuable in her life. Only by the most insipid neutrality can anyone hope to have a school where children are 'independent' (and even then there are always the outside influences of families and friends). The born teacher is not afraid to help her children, bringing strength and balance to

their growing powers and giving support or praise or criticism as occasion demands. She never imposes her will, she encourages and develops the faculties she finds.

What matters is the teacher's personal conviction. If she has that, then she will be able to respect the children and dare to trust their instincts; and she will realize that it is no good trying to influence their minds except on a basis of mutual confidence and understanding. If we are unaffectedly single-minded in our aims, there should be no difficulty for any of us in earning children's confidence.

But if there is to be real give and take and not just lip-service, it is essential for the teacher to be on the same terms with the children as a mother with hers. A mother is always watching for signs of resemblance between herself and her child, as added proofs of her maternity. Degrees of 'yours' and 'mine' become quickly blurred between them; and in the same way whatever of mine I give to my pupil comes back to me later as *his*, when he has moulded it to his liking. The child is an off-shoot of the teacher's mind, and the teacher is a source of life to him; but equally the teacher is an offshoot of the child's mind, and the child rejoices in the sense of enrichment and security he gets from his partnership with her.

So I think we may say that respect for children's individuality does not mean giving up all influence over them, but, on the contrary, really influencing them from within, creating an understanding with

them and, to this end, sharing their interests and meeting each one on equal terms. The teacher must be ready to wait quietly and patiently for their interests to spread, always remembering that the scope and variety will depend largely on her inspiration.

The teacher at Portomaggiore never forgot her personal faith. She had a love of simple things and humble creatures, combined with a strong family sense, and she always tried to teach her children to know and love their own people. On her side, her mother, her brother Nando and her sister were continually with her, in school, and she often talked about them, so that the children learned to know and love them too.

On the literary side her tastes matched her feelings. Barbarini and Pascoli were among her favourite poets, as they were among her brother's. Barbarini was, as a matter of fact, a friend of the family and a well-known visitor at the school, and his sad, gentle little songs were beloved of teacher and children. Pascoli, certainly one of our greatest children's poets, had much of his own work to offer; but through him, too, the children learned to read and enjoy literature of all kinds, from every age and country. Pascoli is at one with Signorina Nigrisoli in wanting to make a real study of country things. He is the Italian poet who comes nearest to the ideals of Lucy Latter and the science-poetry of Fabre. It is true to say that the

first three years of the Portomaggiore five-year experiment were a kind of preparation for the full understanding of all that Pascoli has to say to ten-year-olds. In the last two years his own poems gave the finishing touch.

Such are the marks of this teacher's personality on her school. She never interrupts the pace of her children's mental and moral growth, but she cannot help leaving her own stamp on it, and more than any mental test her touch reveals the character of each separate child. When she fails to make contact with one of them, she knows she must watch herself and him; there must be something wrong with one or the other—either the child has lost touch because he is for the moment lacking in concentration, or because he is absorbed by some distress or anxiety; or there is in one of them some real obstacle to understanding and progress.

It is the teacher who gives the children self-control. Using her as a mirror, they learn how to find themselves. And to help them to see more clearly she takes part herself in all their work and play. She performs *on her own account* all that she asks of them. With them she looks after the house and garden and takes care of the animals and birds; she joins in their games, helps to get meals ready, shares their jokes and borrows their toys; even during lessons she learns unaffectedly side by side with them. These children are not forced to do anything just because they are at school; whatever

the teacher asks them to do she is prepared to do herself, every time, with them and in their way. This is the secret of all 'new education' schools: the teacher's activities are the same as the children's, and both are busy in the same workshop, absorbed in the common good. In the 'old-fashioned' school the children knew that only 'children's work' was expected of them, as opposed to 'teacher's work.' And that was the trouble.

As we have seen, a typical example of lessons at Portomaggiore is composition, in which I include the diaries. Let me illustrate from them:

In the preceding chapters I have examined the children's diaries from the point of view of school records; I did not mention that the teacher kept one of her own—not for the benefit of the inspector, but for the children's sake. From the beginning of the second year, she began to carry out this idea, producing every morning a large sheet of paper, 'teacher's diary.' It seemed an excellent way of making a link between her and her twelve pupils—of focusing their attention on worth-while things and by example offering inspiration and suggestion for their own diaries. It was also a way of commenting silently on the day's doings; and of providing a useful source of reading matter. To them, it was not just a page out of a book, but something written by their own teacher. Through curiosity alone they would have devoured it without fail, every day.

Here are the first 'numbers':—



"My dear children. This is my diary. Every morning I am going to write something for you."

*November 12:* "To-day I am going to begin the story of the 'Four Moors.'<sup>1</sup> We are going to work in the garden, and I am going to give you a lovely poem to learn."

*November 13:* "This afternoon you will see some new furniture which you will love.

"I have written to Milan for you. I have asked them to send: 2 iron balls, 2 tambourines, 6 indiarubber balls, a game of battledore and shuttlecock and 2 wooden hoops."

*November 16:* "On Sunday morning I was walking along with lots of people all round me when I heard a little voice call me: 'Signorina!' It was Fernanda with her barrow, and her granny was there too.

"I said: 'What lovely things you have there, Fernanda!' I wanted very much to buy something, so I bought a beautiful aluminium pan for our kitchen." . . .

*November 23:* "Beginning from to-day, I am going to hand over the doves to you to take care of. You must give them their food every morning at ten and every afternoon at three. Please see that the dovecote is kept clean and that the nesting boxes are always ready. . . ."

*November 26:* "Yesterday morning I looked out of my window at the lovely bright day. Suddenly, on the first robinia to the left, in the lane, there was a

<sup>1</sup> "I Quattro del Molo," probably referring to a monument of four Moors on the quay at Livorno.

'Cheep . . . cheep . . . frr . . . frrr . . . ' and two little birds flew out. I thought they were two sparrows, but then I looked carefully and saw that they were a lovely grey colour and had black heads—two black-caps!"

*November 27:* "Yesterday, when I went to open my brother's window, I saw two new birds. I do not know what they are called. They are like sparrows, but they have long, thin beaks. We shall have to find their name in the bird book. . . ." The rest contains various comments on the news of the day, tidying leaves<sup>1</sup> and notes for nature study.

But the diary has another side. Sometimes the teacher talks about the children themselves, so that we have a series of little portrait sketches, done with extraordinary sympathy and understanding:—

*December 7:* "Who knows who this is? He is seven years old. Sometimes he is very, very slow, but sometimes his legs run away with him like a mouse.

"His writing is like crows' feet, but perhaps that is because his hands are still rather small. Anyhow, whatever his writing, he has the most lovely, clear voice! When everybody is singing together, I can hear his voice loud and beautiful above all the others. . . ."

*December 20:* "*Who is she?* She is very nice and she tries very hard. Sometimes, even when her friends are

<sup>1</sup> For example: January 10, 1921: "As soon as you have finished your work, go into the garden and pick up the dead leaves from the grass. I want to get the whole of our garden in order this week."

playing games, she stays in reading and writing. She wants to do well, and she knows that her writing is not very good and that she has to work harder than some of the others. She has been away, ill, for a long time."

Of course, the children soon guess which is which, and the kind words are a joy to the one whom they concern.

As time goes on, the teacher takes more and more obvious pleasure in her diary. It is her own, allotted task, and she gets more and more into the way of forgetting her position and jotting down her ideas quite simply, just like the children, and always within the range of their interests. As a result, the children's own diaries become less like school exercises because "teacher does it too." She has confided in them, she has set the example and they all get accustomed to talking to each other in writing.

*January 10:* "First thing in the morning, when we get up, we find Torp still asleep on the kitchen chair. We light the fire, get the coffee ready, clean the shoes and still he goes on sleeping. But when Nando comes down, all ready to go to Ferrara, Torp lifts up his head, jumps down off the chair and runs off with Nando as far as the station. Then he comes home and goes to sleep again."

*January 15:* "Yesterday, when we were walking about beside the acacia, the white chicken flew up on to my mother's shoulder. We smiled; and then when Giorgio put out his hand to stroke it, the chicken

flew up higher still—on to her head! I think Giorgio wished the chicken had sat on *his* head, but it never goes to people it doesn't know well. I think we will keep chickens at school, and then we shall have them perching on our hands and shoulders."

*January 17:* "Have you noticed how the grey cat runs away, frightened, when he hears your voices or sees you coming? Shall we try to tame him?"

*February 24:* "Yesterday evening, children, I wrote to Barbarini.<sup>1</sup> I told him how the violets are in bud and that soon the acacia will be all covered with flowers, and how the black-caps and goldfinches have come back. And then I said that he must come back, too, quickly, and enjoy the lovely spring with you."

*February 28:* "'Teck . . . teck teck. Teck . . . teck teck.' Now I know the name of the bird who makes that noise. Giorgio knows, too. On Saturday evening we were walking together on the grass near your flowerbeds and we heard it: 'Teck . . . teck teck. Teck . . . teck teck.' 'Do you hear that, Giorgio?' 'Yes.' 'What bird can it be?' I asked. 'Quietly, Giorgio, we'll see if we can see him.' 'He's there, on that round tree,' said Giorgio. 'Oh yes, on the robinia,' said I. Very, very slowly and quietly we went up and looked carefully. It was rather dark. Then the bird hopped down and shook his feathers, and suddenly I saw a little bit

<sup>1</sup> Barbarini the poet was obviously fond of the school. As I have explained, he was a great friend of the teacher's brother, Nando, and he loved coming and talking to the children.

of bright colour, like fire. I asked Giorgio if he could see—it was a red-breast.”

Often the teacher's diary is illustrated with little drawings, illustrations of country life, like the first shoots of narcissus or the first primroses, if she finds them by herself, without the children. It encourages them to draw, too. Sometimes her entry for the day is just a few lines from a poem, with a drawing describing it. At other times, there are serious and necessary notices:—

*April 13:* “Children, yesterday evening I saw a beautiful shiny, black blackbird beside the little mountain. He came hopping in among the fir-trees. I am sure he is going to make his nest in there among the fir-tree branches, so please do not play too near there, in case he goes away.

“A ‘saturnia’ butterfly has laid her eggs on the wire-netting outside the window overlooking the kitchen garden. Be very careful not to spoil them.”

*May 17:* “Let us be very careful never to forget to water our seeds and the little plants that are showing.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I think I have given a faithful account of Signorina Nigrisoli's school. From time to time visitors to the school have written down their impressions; and I find them very like my own, although they are based on the real thing, while mine are only gathered from documents. Still further data (if any were needed) is

to be found in the teacher's *private* journal: some twenty exercise books, full of short notes in tiny handwriting, much abbreviated. It is a treatise in the real sense, and so full of frank, intimate detail that I can still hardly believe my good fortune in being allowed to read it.

It has left me strangely moved. Her faith fills me with wonder, and I only wish I could have known the brother who fostered it and who is still the guiding influence in the work which has survived him.

Nothing else has ever been written about the Portomaggiore garden school. Its neighbours are hardly aware of its existence, so modest is its scope. It is still more of an idea than a movement, and I have been the only one to break the silence by writing to one or two people in Emilia to tell them about the school and try to interest them in the pioneer schoolmistress. A significant comment on her personality is the following letter I received from Guido Marpillero, the well-known President of the Ferrara Training College, whom I asked to send me his impressions.

He went to Portomaggiore, first alone and then with his students. (I ought to say that the school is now limited to a kindergarten, but it still shows all the qualities of the experiment I have been describing.) The President was delighted. But, being an educationist, he wanted the teacher to explain and illustrate her methods. I am afraid he was disappointed. He wrote:—

"MY DEAR PROFESSOR,

"Some days ago we went to Portomaggiore to see the kindergarten you mentioned. I took a party of students and staff, and I asked the head mistress to describe her methods to the students. Signorina Nigrisoli is clearly not fond of talking, and she excused herself, saying that she would send me a short, written account in a few days. But yesterday, what do you think I received?—The 1914 Regulations and Schemes of Work for Kindergarten, with the main passages marked in pencil! It seems that Signorina Nigrisoli, in her simplicity, thinks that she has made her school what it is by applying the principles contained in the Regulations; and there are many who might believe her. It does not occur to her that kindergarten of no value at all have resulted from those very Schemes. She quite fails to take into account the personal element, just as important in education as in any other art.

"Artists are not just theorists, and theorists are not necessarily artists. The same canons are followed by good and bad poets alike.

"FERRARA, *June 24, 1926.*"

What *can* you say about the Portomaggiore 'method'? It is simply that this school has realized instinctively some of the best conceptions of the 'new education.' New schools like it have been springing up in every country in Europe and America during the last twenty-five years, as reactions against the old traditions. Take a book like Adolphe Ferrière's

*L'École Active*: on every page there is something which might refer to Portomaggiore.

Here is an extract from the children's 'free study period,' described by Signorina Nigrisoli in her diary of January 25, 1920:—

"'I know the whole poem (by Signor Nando),' said Giorgio. 'Let's hear it.' Giorgio comes out beside me, facing his friends, and speaks very, very slowly, with an expression of great solemnity. Looking at his serious little face, I can see that he is not at all distressed by his audience; he is saying his 'piece,' and not to be disturbed. The words come quite naturally. There is no suggestion of repeating something learned in order to be repeated. On the contrary, here is a person mastering a piece of literature for his own purposes and because he enjoys it.

"'When did you learn it?' 'I didn't exactly *learn* it. In the morning when I wake up I say it over to myself ever so quietly, and so I got to know it.' . . ."

Often the children plan their own work:—

*January 14, 1922*: "Belletti and Bellini are running about down below, all over the playground and garden. Whatever are they looking for? It turns out that they are pursuing some investigation of their own. They come back like a breath of fresh air, and we learn that they have been looking for inspiration among the fir-trees, as well as hunting about the vegetable garden, peering and sniffing the air. Still panting, they tell me the result of their researches."



There are constant examples of co-operation among the children:—

*January 18, 1922:* "This morning Belletti announced that he had no idea what to write about. He was sitting by the front window, in a basket chair, with the others round him offering advice. In the end he decided to take Ario's suggestion and describe his 'rather plump pig.' "

*January 20, 1922:* "To-day they acted the first part of *Pinocchio* in the hall. Antonio planed the wood, and suddenly in the middle of his work a strange voice interrupted, protesting. Geppetto came in, speaking in a shrill, uncertain way, making a good contrast with the two old people.

"Ario knows how to speak naturally, but Vittore was not sure of himself. However, both came up to scratch perfectly in the quarrel scene. That part was a great success!

" 'Who will be the blue-haired fairy?'<sup>1</sup> asked Fernanda, longing, of course, to be chosen herself . . . "

In the teacher's record for February and March of this year there are signs of a constant striving after Dewey's conception of real life in everyday things. In arithmetic, for instance, often the dulllest of subjects, the children are allowed to follow their own initiative:—

*February 15:* "We are taking things quite quietly. When they feel they really know the rules, they begin

<sup>1</sup> "La fata dei capelli turchini."—See the story of *Pinocchio*.—M. C. G.

to make up problems for themselves and are always asking for new ones, from me and from each other. The better they get, the more they want to practise."

Arithmetic is always related to the children's experience, and so is geometry, which they do as field work, out of doors, measuring and planning out the ground like practical surveyors.

On February 18th the teacher describes a story she told:—

"To-day we were all very much interested in Mark Twain's story of the little Eskimo girl. In the morning we had seen some pictures of Eskimos wrapped in furs, and the children already knew a little about polar regions; so this story went down better than any lesson I could have given on the customs of the people. To the children it was like something really seen and heard, almost as good as a visit to a country covered with ice and snow—particularly as they had our own recent snowstorm still in mind.

"‘Are there children there too?’ (The story was about an Eskimo family.) ‘Of course.’ ‘Oh, yes,’ said Ario, ‘they’d have a lovely time sliding on all that ice.’

"The story has a tragic end. The fish-hook, about which all the trouble has been, is discovered, after the innocent girl has been punished. When I had finished, there was a moment of perplexed silence; then a sudden burst of movement from the more active. Bellini rushed across the room, and Ario,

Giorgio and Vittore followed. The rest remained sitting, too unhappy to move."

And all this emotion, with people "rushing across the room," takes place in school. Some might be horrified; but I am only amazed at the human understanding of the teacher.

*March 4-5-7, 1922. Creative play:—*

"These lovely mornings of early spring the children feel they want to be out in the sun all the time. They have asked for kites, and I think I must let them have some." "To-day we began making the kites." "Giorgio is engrossed in making kites. He produces quantities, for himself and for other people."

*March 22, 1922. Construction:—*

"We have decided to fix three little awnings to the walls of the house, outside, to look like the overhanging eaves of cottages. Perhaps the swallows will come and build under them."

*Reference books instead of primers:—*

"We have been looking up the names of some wild flowers we don't know in various books. I tell the children, if they are not able to find the real Italian names, to give the dialect names they are used to; and if they can find no name at all, to make up some name, all of us together. There is a word to describe everything, as Pascoli, our poet, says."

Signorina Nigrisoli's diary is full of delights; and possibly even more interesting than the parts I have already quoted are her schemes of work for the day. They give an excellent picture of a real 'activity

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school.' I have chosen one or two from among hundreds:—

"November 24, 1922: *Garden*. Take the dahlia corms into the shed. Get out bowls for the hyacinth bulbs. Dig up the tuberose bulbs. Finish digging the long bed. Tidy the rose bed and the yucca bed."

Another aspect—*school work*:—

May 3, 1922: "Last month's flowers and butterflies. Story: Lohengrin. Poetry: *The Olive*. Geography: A garden plant at home."

An ideal common to the 'new schools' is that of corporate life in close contact with the nursery school babies. It has been one of the most cherished schemes at Portomaggiore for all the children, in their varying ages, to join together in all manner of activities, without distinction of classes, as in a family. The Portomaggiore kindergarten, as we know it to-day, is no different from Rina Nigrisoli's original experiment. Far from excluding the nursery section, the experiment was in its essence a continuation of the nursery years, with the big children always taking an active part in the little ones' lives.

January 17: "I thought four of my girls would never go home to-day. Fernanda, Elvezia, Ottorina and Andreina happened to open Rosa Agazzi's Song Book, and they began to sing the songs through, straight away. They found all they had learnt during the last years, and they sang with such vigorous pleasure that I felt as if the summer had come back, although

the room was cold and the windows looked out on to a white waste of snow."

Then followed the first introduction to practical literary work: copying out school songs, so far only learnt by heart. The children made their own choice—of the songs most appreciated at home, because, of course, the copies were for their personal benefit.

*January 14, 1922:* "This morning Gino copied out the poem, *Red Moon and White Moon*. He said his mother liked it particularly, but he couldn't remember it well enough to sing to her.

"Ario wanted to have *The Orphan Girl*, a gypsy song he knows, because 'Mummy likes it and so do all the other people in our court. They call me and get me to sing it.'"

There is no distinction of age in the children's games and group work:—

*March 22 (New children):* "A little girl of three, daughter of a railway man, a bright, quick little soul, has for some reason aroused their interest and affection. She came to-day for the first time. Giorgio, above all, overwhelmed her with attentions and kept asking her questions for the pleasure of hearing her answer. They stood round her, chanting a poem of Barbarini's: *Spring, Spring, Little Eyes of Grey*, apparently charmed by her pretty ways. Then the little girls took charge of her, made games for her and finally took her off to play among the distant fir-trees so that they could have her all to themselves. I shall never forget Giorgio's face as he looked at her. Usually he is gruff and

proud, but to-day his expression was one of protection, love and admiration; with our little new-comer he was as quiet and gentle as one could wish."

*April 1, 1922:* "Ario has done his work of tidying the garden quite well and does not seem tired after it. He chose one of the youngest girls, Eugenia, to help him, and was quick to praise her if anyone showed surprise that he had picked out such a little one. He said: 'She's exactly right for what I want.'"

The little girls from the big school make excellent assistants. In the teacher's record there is a quotation from the diary of one of the older ones:—

*November 25, 1922:* "This morning, while the others were writing their diaries, Elvezia and I stayed indoors and helped the babies to make patterns with beads. They worked away ever so quietly with all the different colours, only every now and then someone called out: 'Fernanda! Elvezia! look at my chair!—look at my house!' And then, of course, we said how lovely they all were."

\* \* \* \* \*

That is the 'method'—there is nothing more to it. Step by step, it is illustrated in the children's work, so why go out of your way to define it further? Signorina Nigrisoli is a person, not a formula, and like every honest teacher she knows that a good 'method' relies first and last on untiring devotion.

Sometimes in her records there are notes on education in general, put in to emphasize some particular

point; but she never describes her system in so many words, and far from posing as a pioneer, she is constantly warning herself against herself:—

"Mustn't be carried away with enthusiasm."  
"Don't expect too much of any new gospel." "Don't ask too much of the children."

Once she even quotes Marcus Aurelius, of all people:—

"A person should live each day as if it were the last—never rushing but never careless, always realizing that there is an end to all things."

A wise philosophy for teachers which shows that they should live their beliefs, not write about them! Or, if they do put anything into words, let it be very simply, an aspiration, nothing more. I do not mean that I want all teachers to pray about their work; but only that, if they are humble of heart, Divine inspiration will lie behind every thought and act.

I can imagine that many of my readers will want to know more definitely whether God, the God of the Church, really comes into the life of the school, whether the children's religion, as I have described it, is that of their fathers. There are those who think that I, personally, am a hopeless pagan, I know.

All I can say is that the spirit of the new education means less dogma and more charity. We do not want to confuse the school's teaching with that of the Church, and we believe that far from being mutually exclusive, there is room for each to supplement the other. As

for the religious teaching at Portomaggiore, let me give you one last page from Signorina Nigrisoli's diary:—

*February 23, 1923:* "The children were very much touched to-day by the story of Jesus. Ario, Giorgio and Fernanda particularly, were obviously moved, and their eyes shone with tears. Dear, unspoilt listeners, surely the grace of Christ was among you at that moment.

"Later, I found them looking steadfastly at the Crucifix in the hall, and I heard Elvezia say: 'Now I really *can* believe with the whole of me.' "

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